

Frogs: The Future of Literature?

A central image in both Miguel de Unamuno's *Mist* and Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is that of characters coming to life and interacting with their author. As a result of these encounters, many questions are raised, among them: who/what is an author, and why do they write? The two works in question offer several different ideas of what an author is: a director, a scribe, a watchmaker, a scientist, or even a character in a larger work. However, every possible definition of the function of an author that these works present, they soon proceed to subvert. Each work also offers a different reaction to this authorial identity crisis: Pirandello, one of despair (though I don't see this as his own personal response), and Unamuno, one of resigned amusement.

The above definitions of what an author does/is can be classified into two groups: active and passive. Active author functions would include the director and the scientist; passive functions would include the scribe and watchmaker. The idea of author as director is expressed most clearly by Pirandello, in that the stage director agrees to become the author sought by the characters to write their play. Theoretically, this function gives the author the most control over the characters. However, the characters in Pirandello's play (as opposed to the actors, since they are all technically characters) challenge this idea of the author by trying to direct their own play, as when the stepdaughter says to the father: "Make your entrance. You don't have to walk around. Come straight here. Make believe you've already come in," to which the director responds: "Do you mind telling me, are you directing, or am I?" (Pirandello 42). In evaluating the idea of author as director in Pirandello's play, we must consider the degree to and manner in which the director is able to exercise control. At several points, the director must seemingly reason with the characters and persuade them to do things his way, such as when they are discussing how to stage the scenes with the little boy, the little girl and the son. In an attempt to win over the stepdaughter, the director says, "We will have the garden scene. Don't you worry, we'll have it in the garden. You're going to be happy with the way it turns out" (Pirandello 58). This passage would indicate that the staging of the play is a collaborative effort between the director/author and the characters, with the director having the final say. This collaboration can be contrasted with the seemingly absolute control claimed by the "in-book-author" Don Miguel (that is, Unamuno's character based on himself as author). When Augusto threatens to kill Don Miguel, Don Miguel decides to kill Augusto. This is in some way based on input from the character (in the form of a death-threat), but not at all in accordance with his wishes. Don Miguel seems to think that with the stroke of his pen, he can alter the fate of his character, but, strangely, he cannot change what he has written. "I hereby render judgment and pass the sentence that you are to die," Don Miguel tells Augusto. "It is now written, and I cannot now recall it" (Unamuno 302-304). Augusto's subsequent death at the end of the story, which he tries

unsuccessfully to delay, would serve as evidence that Don Miguel really had this power, although this evidence is not incontestable.

The more passive idea of the author as scribe is by no means post-modern. Ever since the Muses of the ancients, the idea has existed that the author takes his inspiration or even direct dictation from a source outside of himself. More recently, "theories" have abounded that all stories actually exist in some dimension, independent of the author, and the author's only function is to write them down. Calvino in his *If on a winter's night a traveler* even toys with the idea that stories are beamed into authors' heads by aliens. Augusto in *Mist* voices this challenge to Don Miguel very directly: "May it not be that you are nothing but a pretext for bringing my history into the world?" (Unamuno 295). Victor (another of Unamuno's characters) alludes to the idea with more humor: "Suppose, for example, that some—some 'nivolist' were hiding here now, taking stenographic notes of all that we were saying" (Unamuno 287). Pirandello has the director/author in his play do exactly this, when he tells the prompter to "follow the scenes as we play them little by little and try to get down the dialogue, or at least the major points" (Pirandello 33). This function of the author is the most passive of all, denying him any creative role in the creation of the characters or the story. The watchmaker function is slightly more creative in that it implies that the author creates characters and then turns them loose to do as they will (or that they break loose on their own and come alive), though this function quickly turns into that of the scribe once the characters come alive. "When a character is born, he immediately assumes so much independence, that he can be imagined by everybody in a number of other situations in which the author never dreamed of putting him, and sometimes he even acquires a meaning the author never dreamed of giving him" (Pirandello 56). In such a situation, all the author can do is "follow [the characters] in their words and actions, which they precisely suggest to him" (Pirandello 56). What would be the motivation of an author in this situation? One can only imagine that he would write under compulsion from the characters, whose story would already be formed.

Some theories hold that authors write for self-preservation, to immortalize themselves in their words. This is not the case in these two works, or, if this is what the in-book-authors set out to do, they are foiled. A common element in both works is the characters forcing the authors to question their own existence/identity. Again, it is Victor who observes most succinctly that "the most liberating effect of art is that it makes one doubt whether one does exist" (Unamuno 289). Augusto asks directly, "May it not be, my dear Don Miguel, [...] that it is you and not I who are the fictitious entity?" (Unamuno 295). In asking the director, "who are you?" the father says that characters, because of their fixed characteristics and unchanging reality, are always "someone", while a changeable man (an author) can be "nobody" (Pirandello 54-55). In both books is found the idea that characters are immortal; they cannot die because they do not live. Perhaps this is one reason that Pirandello and Unamuno have written themselves into their books—as authors they must doubt their existence, but as characters they will live on. Yet, what is it to be only a character in a greater story, as Victor

suggests to Augusto (Unamuno 286)? Both books in the end grapple with this disturbing possibility, dealing with it quite differently.

A final option presented by these works for the role of an author is that of experimental scientist, in which the author creates characters and puts them into different situations to see how they react. This role is active in that the author is in control of the experiment, and can manipulate events and settings as a scientist would manipulate variables. The motivation for this view of writing might be to try and distill truths about human nature, if these are taken to exist, which is not certain in this postmodern era, or it might simply be amusement, as a schoolboy might mix chemicals just to see what happens. This role is exemplified by Augusto in his attempt to conduct a “psychological experiment” on Eugenia. Augusto almost takes on an authorial role when he creates his own Eugenia, and later attempts to analyze the real one. Augusto’s transformation from experimenter into frog (Unamuno 253) parallels the existential crisis of the authors in both books. In making himself a character in his own book, Unamuno may be following Victor’s advice to Augusto: “make a frog of yourself”—“jump into the pool and croak for a living” (Unamuno 282). Victor gives this advice to Augusto after telling him that he must confound reality and fiction, dream with waking, the true with the false (Unamuno 282). Pirandello does this less directly by referring to one of his plays and then having the actors in the play comment about and try to interpret it, and by having them comment on his style in general, which as they describe never intended “to please either the critics or actors or public” (Pirandello 8).

If we take his characters’ evaluation of his drama as a statement of Pirandello’s intentions as a playwright (which it may or may not be), then what could be the purpose of his writing? Perhaps he writes only to raise questions, to spread and thicken the mist and confusion proclaimed by Victor in *Mist*. If the author is not a director or a scientist or even a watchmaker, what is he to be? Pirandello’s director presents one possible reaction to this confusion of true and false, reality and fiction: “no longer able to put with it all,” he shouts, “Make-believe! Reality! You can all go to Hell, every last one of you!” (Pirandello 65). This play, though it came ten years after *Mist*, seems to portray the modernist author who despairs of ever finding a purpose and writes for the sake of communicating his despair. Unamuno’s book comes no closer to finding any real purpose for writing, but treats this problem with the playfulness of the deconstructionists. Victor’s comment that “all this dialectical subtlety and talk, this juggling with words and definitions—it serves to pass the time!” (Unamuno 286) seems an embodiment of Derrida’s deconstructionist idea of *jouissance*, or the playful ambiguity of language as it constantly subverts itself. Victor may even be seen as a prophet of postmodernism; his words “experiment upon yourself” and “devour yourself” (Unamuno 282-283) set the stage for the reflexive nature of postmodern literature, which loves to experiment with and explore its own conventions and capabilities, as well as to question the very nature of its own existence.

Works Cited

- Pirandello, Luigi. *Six Characters in Search of an Author and Other Plays*. Trans. Mark Musa. London: Penguin Books, 1995.
- Unamuno, Miguel de. *Mist*. Trans. Warner Fite. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

Zofia S. Kaminski

Sarah from the Book of Tobit

I saw that I was weeping once again.
The world, my mind, have become disjointed.
I sorrow too much to actually feel.
Now I react and watch myself react.
The demons haunt me, eyes watching me,
Narrow glowing slits of coldest fire,
Laughing at me and clawing at my soul.
My mother helps prepare the wedding bed.
Everyone knows it will remain unused.
Silence precedes me as gossip flutters.
The killer of her seven noble husbands.
“Murderer, murderer,” so their eyes say.
I think, perhaps, it is better this way.
I can stay safe and undefiled and pure.
Women’s talk has warned me of dishonor.
I would rather be barren than destroyed.
Yet, I wonder about him, my kinsman,
His eyes shine with something like godliness,
He does not fear demons or murderers.
Perhaps I weep from love, I do not know.
My father has begun to dig his grave.