



“Psychic Degenerate”: Why G. Was Interned

Abstract This chapter explains how homosexuality was pathologised: to do this, it traces the origins of the “effeminate male” stereotype, explaining how the socio-cultural concept of degeneration was extended to include “sexual inversion”. Through the doctors’ words, G.’s biography starts to take shape and it becomes clear how it matched the “degenerate” and “effeminate pederast” stereotypical description.

Keywords Effeminate male stereotype • Homosexuality • Vagrant • Unemployed

This chapter explains how homosexuality was pathologized. To do this, it traces the origins of the “effeminate male” stereotype, identifying how the socio-cultural concept of degeneration was extended to include “sexual inversion” and how the figure of the “pederast” was essential to the fascist rhetoric of virility. It illustrates how G. fitted the stereotype of the homosexual and of the degenerate.

G. was referred by his brother. But a simple dispute over money between siblings could have been settled by the police, even considering threats, aggressiveness or disturbance caused to neighbours.

In this case, internment was “necessary and urgent”¹ because G. showed several aspects of degeneracy. To start with, he had no fixed address, thus falling in the socially dangerous category of vagrants. In G.’s admission file

there is a certificate, handwritten by his birth-village *Podestà*, the Medieval name given to Mayors during the fascist regime, which stated that he “has always led a wandering and vagabond life”.² Being a vagabond with no fixed address was no longer a crime under the 1889 Zanardelli legal code, still in force in 1928, but according to its art. 94³ it was a factor that could justify security forces’ intervention.

Secondly G. was unemployed, another socially worrying element. Here it represented an even bigger anomaly since he had a degree and came from a middle-class family. Unemployment could be read as a clear sign of his lack of social skills together with an inability to fit into a work environment, which, as Dörner points out, has been closely tied with insanity from the industrial revolution onwards.⁴ Thirdly, he owned nothing. One of his brothers in fact declared that he had no assets or properties in the village where he was born⁵ and the Turin police confirmed that, consequently, there was no need to nominate a financial administrator in his absence.⁶ This could have been interpreted as another sign of his lack of financial skills or, worse, as an indication of him having dissipated his wealth. The file contains correspondence between the hospital Administration and the Province Authorities with regard to payments of the patient’s fees, which testifies that, despite its means, G.’s family did not agree to pay them to have him sent to one of the pavilions for paying guests, which would have guaranteed a better treatment. His social status box is filled in with “*povero*”, indigent, belonging to the lower classes that so worried the *bourgeois* state from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.

Above all, G. was a homosexual. When denouncing him to the police, his brother, a renowned doctor and a fascist of the first hour, as he proudly described himself,⁷ had not just told them about his persecutory actions to obtain money. He had concluded his accusations with an explosive detail: G. had “homosexual tendencies”. He made this revelation knowing it would lead to internment and in fact this aspect was prominently noted in G.’s Collegno asylum admission and medical file.⁸ This is why a doctor was called to the police station that evening: homosexuality was considered a mental disorder and had to be dealt with by a medical professional.

With this aspect of G.’s personality in mind, most elements of his character and biography fell into place. He was the perfect depiction of the stereotype of the homosexual in too many ways. Several historians⁹ have concentrated on the creation of masculinity ideals as a revealing element of Fascism and its repression of the “other”. George Mosse was the first to analyse the origins of the masculine stereotype,¹⁰ which he placed in

bourgeois society of the late-eighteenth century. As a response to the increase in social problems connected with urban poverty, he observed, “manliness” and traditional values offered a powerful counter-balancing measure to the crisis; but “modern masculinity needed the countertype”¹¹ and therefore those who did not conform to this ideal masculinity concept were identified as “other”, different, unmanly. The figure of the dandy that embodied the *Fin-du-Siècle* attempts to redefine men’s role in society, was now stigmatised as a clear sign of moral and social corruption. Benadusi¹² underlined how the fascist propaganda attempts to build the Italian New Man ideal could only be fully effective if its antagonist was created too, that of the “effeminate pederast”. Virility, Mosse argued, became a national symbol during the regime, embodied by the dictator’s himself, his physique, his behaviour and way of addressing the crowds, his gestures; dandyism, weakness, effeminacy were perceived as anything that stood in the way, anything that was anti-Mussolini and his ideology. Furthermore, as the regime concentrated on demographic campaigns, homosexuality came to be perceived as sterile and therefore essentially anti-fascist and selfish, against what was good for the nation. The New Italian Man’s actions were to be inspired by his love for the country: private life was considered a responsible act towards the nation, sexuality had to be aimed at procreation. Every Italian had the duty to be physically and morally fit, the regime insisted on the necessity to practice regular physical activity that would guarantee strength and health. Anybody that appeared different from this norm was considered as visibly contesting fascist ideals: the anti-New Man stereotype was lazy, weak, cowardly, undisciplined, selfish in its anti-family choice and therefore a scrounger and a parasite of society. His refusal to be an integral part of civilised life made him ugly, disharmonious, ridiculous.

Zuccarello¹³ investigated these concepts further, showing how effeminity came to equal “ugliness” under Fascism, the opposite of grace, strength and classically-inspired beauty: the homosexual was portrayed as thin, emaciated, pale, his eyes reddened by vice. A concept that the psychiatric profession took to its extreme consequences, in accordance with Lombroso’s theories: deviancy, as mentioned, was thought to have some identifiable physical traits, homosexuals, criminals, prostitutes were examined, in search for some physical points of resemblance that would allow categorisation.

Going back to G.’s case, it is now clear how he could be interned, given the theoretical and cultural context. The Collegno asylum doctor confirmed

the diagnosis written by the colleague who had visited him at the police station and G.'s first succinct medical assessment is the perfect summary of what a homosexual was expected to be like: born in a small village in Piedmont, in the North West of Italy, as a boy he was sent to a seminary, so that he would be initiated to the clerical profession, but he changed idea; the implication of this statement is that he showed inconsistency, lack of will, fickleness, which, as highlighted earlier, were regarded as typical of effeminacy. Before World War I he joined the *Carabinieri* but, after three years of regular service, he was dismissed "for reasons that he ignores"¹⁴ a doubly negative remark on the fact that, firstly, he was considered unsuitable to be in a prestigious force such as the *Carabinieri* and, secondly, he did not care to find out why he was dismissed, showing superficiality, or maybe a devious aptitude to lying, as he did not want to admit the reasons for his dismissal. He did not fight at the front, thus revealing cowardice, unfitness and lack of strength, other elements that linked him to the anti-New Man stereotype. He managed to become an officer, but was "retroceded because of his homosexual practices – which the patient admits – with a soldier".¹⁵ He then got a degree in Law and taught in various private schools, but at the time of internment he was unemployed and lived in Milan with a woman. All these statements pointed unmistakably at social inadequacy connected with moral degeneracy: he unashamedly admitted homosexuality, was unable to find a proper job and to lead a normal life. Besides, he scandalously co-habited with a woman to whom he was not married. The doctor added that G. had asked his brother for some money, but, at his refusal to give him anything, he had threatened to kill his brother and himself unless he obtained the sum requested: suicide tendencies were a common reason for internment, as the Collegno archives reveal.¹⁶ Besides being considered contagious, they were also believed, in Darwinian terms, to be the ultimate sign of unfitness to life. Homicidal threats in this case must have offered G.'s brother a further good reason to denounce him to the police. Most importantly, not only had G. become aggressive in his requests, he had also shown he wanted to live off other people's wealth: in other words, he was a lazy, selfish parasite, attributes increasingly associated with homosexuality. To conclude, as mentioned earlier, G. had no fixed address, an unmistakable sign of moral and mental disorder for psychiatrists at the time. From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, asylums had been working as a segregation place for vagrants, together with alcoholics, prostitutes and other categories of people who were thought to be infected and infectious members of society.¹⁷

Therefore, G. embodied the quintessentially different, rebellious, degenerate, non-conforming and socially threatening individual. In addition, he was “not conscious of his state”,¹⁸ which translates into a refusal to consider himself mentally ill, a crucial aspect of what was thought to be the path to rehabilitation.¹⁹ The Collegno nurse typed on the dotted line next to “diagnosis”, on the front page of his medical notes: “exaltation in psychic degenerate with homosexual tendencies”,²⁰ and G. entered one of the biggest psychiatric institutions in Italy.

The chapter explained how G. could be considered a moral deviant in need of psychiatric care and highlighted how his personality description matched the stereotype of the moral degenerate and of the homosexual. However, G.’s case is unique because he left a personal account of his experience: this exceptional autobiographical piece of writing is the focus of the following chapter.

NOTES

1. CA, G.’s file, op. cit.
2. Ibid.
3. Quoted in Lonni, Ada, op. cit.
4. Dörner, Klaus. 1975. *Il Borghese e il Folle. Storia sociale della psichiatria*. Bari: Laterza. I ed. 1969.
5. CA, G.’s file, op. cit.
6. Ibid.
7. Bibliographical reference of his brother’s autobiographical book cannot be given because the author’s surname would make G. immediately identifiable. See Chap. 1.
8. CA, op. cit.
9. Among them Bellasai, Sandro. 2005. The Masculine Mystique: Antimodernism and Virility in Fascist Italy. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 10 (3): 314–335; Bellasai, Sandro and Malatesta, Maria, eds. 2000. *Genere e Mascolinità. Uno sguardo storico* Roma: Bulzoni; Benadusi, Lorenzo, op. cit.; Mosse, George. 1996. *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Spackman, Barbara. 1996. *Fascist Virilities. Rhetoric, Ideology and Social Fantasy in Italy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
10. Mosse, George, op. cit.
11. Ibid., p. 13.
12. Benadusi, Lorenzo, op. cit.
13. Zuccarello, Ugo. 2000. *Omosessualità maschile e modelli di virilità*. In Bellasai, Sandro and Malatesta, Maria, eds., op. cit.

14. CA, G.'s file, op. cit.
15. Ibid.
16. See Chap. 6.
17. Fiorino, Vinzia, op. cit.
18. CA, G.'s file, op. cit.
19. See Chap. 6.
20. CA, op. cit., Tabella Nosografica.

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