



CHAPTER 4

“He and I”: G’s Voice

Abstract This chapter analyses the autobiographical piece of writing that G. deposited at his lawyer’s office before being arrested and interned. In this unique and precious document, he recounted his version of the story, narrating his life and describing the discrimination he had to endure. He accused his brother of persecuting him and attempted to reveal what lay beneath his hypocrisy. This document, that G. entitled *memoriale*, reveals the level of pressure and persecution a homosexual had to face under the fascist regime. Ahead of his time, G. highlighted the socio-economic consequences of homophobia and felt entitled to compensation.

Keywords Situational homosexuality • Passive/active homosexuality • Habitual/casual homosexuality • Persecution

This chapter analyses the autobiographical piece of writing that G. deposited at his lawyer’s office before being arrested and interned.¹ In it, he recounted his version of the story, narrating his life and the discrimination he had had to endure. He accused his brother of persecuting him and attempted to reveal what lay beneath his hypocrisy. This unique document reveals the level of pressure and persecution a homosexual had to face under the fascist regime. Ahead of his time, G. highlighted the

socio-economic consequences of homophobia and felt entitled to a compensation.

The peculiarity of this case is that G. left us his version of the facts, a 31-page long statement² which he had deposited at a lawyer's office before his arrest and subsequent internment, thus showing he foresaw the potential consequences of his actions. Probably he had someone deliver it or he sent it via post, as on the front page there is the lawyer's address, in Milan. The front page shows several remarks written in pen by different people. One states that a copy was sent to the King's Attorney, the other one that the original was deposited at the Turin Attorney General Office. A third note is by G. himself where he signed, a month after his interment, authenticating it as his own writing. Evidently, this was meant to be an important document, for several people and for different purposes. It was kept in G.'s medical file and it was referred to by doctors as one of the patient's manifestations to be analysed, but probably in its author's intentions it could also be exhibited in court in case of legal procedures. Most importantly, it was clearly conceived to be a public document, something that, in the hopes of the writer, would be read by lawyers, police officers, judges, bureaucrats, relatives and doctors. This is a particularly relevant novelty in itself: for the fascist period we are used to reading letters sent to one figure of authority only, written to ask for a more lenient sentence for instance, and therefore scholars have so far analysed texts that were meant to be a sort of private dialogue between two individuals.³ G. wrote something the tone and style of which resemble a court defence speech.

The first reader had to be G.'s brother, through the lawyer: G. opened by asking him to read this document and "to have the courage to proceed extra-judicially",⁴ thus foreseeing that a court procedure was likely. "On this document depends the salvation not just of two brothers, but of entire families"⁵: the style of this document is emphatic, as can be expected given the rhetoric of the time, and the fact that its author is a lawyer.

If this piece of writing does not rescue me, then (if logic is still valid) it will necessarily send me to the asylum or to prison. But may my tyrant brother be warned, to end up in an asylum also a judgement by professionals is required.⁶

Similarly, G. added in a rather complicated manner, to end up in prison one person's statement alone would not be sufficient.

It emerges that G. sent this document specifically to the lawyer who had defended his brother in a court case and had “rescued him from incarceration”.⁷ A strange choice as he was unlikely to be sympathetic to him or to accept to defend him. It seems to be a way to guarantee that his words would be heard by his sibling.

G. then proceeded with his autobiographical account. At the time of writing, G. was 45, 11 years younger than his brother, and the two had been fighting for more than 30 years. He had always been treated as “a stranger, a superfluous or even damaging individual to the family”.⁸ Things had reached a point where his brother had even publicly incited him to commit suicide, an action that deserved from three to seven years sentence by the Zanardelli Code (art. 370), still in force in 1928, and was therefore a strong point in G.’s defence. Consequently, G. felt fatally pushed into using his gun first against his brother and then against himself: it was a way to justify his threats as a response to provocation, which in legal terms was a mitigating factor. Trying to reopen dialogue and wanting to be sensible, G. had sent an intermediary in the past, Mr. C., who was brutally sent away. So, at that point, G. had thought of going to Turin to settle the issue in person but had decided to write to his brother’s lawyer first, to make his point clear.

The following chapter is entitled “*LUI ed IO*” [capitals as in the original],⁹ “He and I”. Here G. started by explaining what his brother was like since he was young:

An absolute dominator with his family, he always did what he wanted to do, disposing of others as he pleased, only thinking about his interests.¹⁰

He had had an easy life, comfortably reached his degree without financial thoughts, could spend money as he liked, was free to do as he pleased, went to parties and even had a banquet organised to celebrate his degree. Then he married a rich woman, who allowed him to continue to lead the life of a millionaire. Even the money for his wedding was provided by his father¹¹ and when his wife died, her relatives continued to give him the necessary sums to carry on this *menage*. While all this was taking place, G. at the age of 10 was sent to work as a cleaner and runner in a deli shop in Turin. Then his brother decided to send him, against his will, to a religious seminary where he spent the years between 12 and 25 of age. G. eventually escaped as he did not want to become a priest, but his brother started influencing their father so that he would force him to join the *Carabinieri*.

“From here he won’t escape again” he would have stated.¹² G.’s youth—he continued—was destroyed by his brother. He was lucky to find sympathetic minds within the seminary and was allowed to teach there for five years, so that he could pay his own studies. In one year he got the *licenza ginnasiale* with excellent marks, then he obtained a diploma in French and finally a degree in Law. He never received any help from the rich and successful sibling. When he moved to Turin in order to complete his university studies, he had to teach in a private Catholic school to pay his living and university expenses. Yet, despite these brilliant achievements, his brother continued to show cynical contempt and manipulated their father into not giving him any financial support to start his career or to rent a room in Turin. G. was always dismissed, despised, never trusted able to have his own family because “physically and morally not suitable for marriage”,¹³ a statement very much in line with eugenic theories.¹⁴ That is why he started travelling in Italy and abroad, looking for jobs here and there: this is a clear attempt to justify his non-conforming life-style, as G. must have known that being a “vagabond” would have looked bad on his CV.¹⁵

The section entitled “My only black spot”¹⁶ opens with a confession: forced to spend his youth in a men-only environment,

fatally, because of the environment ... I fell almost unconsciously (certainly without foreseeing the consequences) into the deplorable sexual habit that unfortunately is typical of the majority of those who spend their physical development period in men’s communities. (...) The monster [underlined in the original] (and I will always shout monster until I am alive) uses this consequence, whose responsibility is his, and has used it as a most powerful and vile weapon to beat me, humiliate me, ruin me, increase respite around me ... revealing it to everybody in public, adding to the list of my credits also that of ... pederasty! (in fact, in my case it would be more precise to say homosexuality).¹⁷

Here G.’s words demonstrate that he was aware of the current ideas on homosexuality and, like in writings by those who were asking for a more lenient sentence or to be pardoned, he knew what his readers expected.¹⁸ Firstly, he underlined he was not a congenital homosexual, he acquired what he described as a “deplorable sexual habit”¹⁹ because of the environment he was in, an important distinction to make as it would entail substantially different consequences.²⁰ This type of homosexuality has

been defined “situational” by Robert Aldrich²¹ who pointed out that in a society where female chastity before marriage was obligatory, homosexual sex was tolerated in certain circumstances as it “represented a ‘lesser evil’ than the seduction of virgins or married women”.²² Secondly, G. clearly stated he was not a pederast, that is, a passive homosexual, committing an act against nature. In his case, he specified, it would be more correct to talk about homosexuality, which indicates that he wanted to be considered an “active” homosexual, another very important element to insist upon because it would have very different consequences.²³

Aldrich explained the cultural origin of this statement very clearly:

sexual attitudes in the South placed great emphasis on an individual’s taking the “active” sexual role in intercourse – that is, penetrating his partner, whether male or female, rather than being penetrated. (...) A man proved his virility and retained social status if he only played the “active” role – or publicly claimed to do so – in intercourse.²⁴

“Coming out”, as it would be called nowadays, was a rare practice: it is not surprising, given that one of the most punishable aspects of homosexuality was its visibility. Besides, as we have seen, “scandal” was not only an aggravating factor in legal, public security proceedings, it could also be decisive in determining the need for internment.²⁵ Consequently, silence was a necessary condition for survival. Previous oral history interviews confirmed this: there was even some form of internal distancing, within queer coteries, from those who were too visible, as they drew negative attention to the group.²⁶ Benadusi²⁷ mentions two instances of men declaring their homosexuality in the fascist years. The first one is the case of a teacher from Ancona who, accused several times for “*oltraggio al pudore*” (offence to decency), corruption of minors and “*adescamento al libertinaggio*” (luring somebody into libertine behaviour), as he had been banned from teaching, had received a number of *ammonizioni* and sentences, was on “*libertà vigilata*” (slightly more lenient than home arrests), started to fight against these restrictive measures. In his letters to the authorities, he admitted he was homosexual, but argued that, if homosexuality was considered an undesired gift of nature, an involuntary condition such as being physically impaired, deaf, blind or paralysed, why should it be persecuted, as physically disabled people were not? He had clearly assimilated the terms of the scientific dispute on whether a congenital condition would or would not imply any responsibility on the part of

those who committed a crime or an immoral action.²⁸ The other case was that of two men arrested with a friend in Germany in 1935 for Marks smuggling. They stated they were a couple because they were unaware it would have legal consequences in Germany, as in Italy sex between adult men technically was not against the law. They avoided trial in Germany and were repatriated but received a three years' *confino* sentence each "because in front of foreign magistrates they had pronounced lying statements which slandered Italy".²⁹

From these two examples and from G.'s case, it emerges that to disclose one's homosexuality was a desperate, last resort. When all was lost, it was the final card to play to highlight some "mitigating" factors. That is precisely what G. did. He "pleaded guilty" because he knew that his brother was likely to mention his homosexuality to the police. He knew the legal framework very well, as can be expected of a man with a degree in Law, and knew equally well what the authorities wanted to hear. So, he claimed he had acquired the vice while in a men-only environment, thus stating his homosexuality was caused by a particular situation and underlined he had been sent to the seminary by his family, against his will. Therefore, the responsibility for the "contagion" was not his. Besides, he was not a passive pederast, a decisive and crucial detail which implied that in his case there was no sexual inversion. He was simply a man driven by a natural need who, pushed by imposed circumstances, had sexual intercourse with men because women were absent. In other words, he was a "situational" homosexual, to quote Aldrich.³⁰ His defence followed a recognisable pattern and in previous oral history interviews, the author frequently came across a similar scenario: many older gay men claimed they had sex with other men because they had been infected with the vice, when still young, by adult men. One man said he got married to stop rumours about his sexuality, while he continued having relationships with men; but always as "a man", that is, as an active homosexual, and he added that the only thing he regretted in life was to have had an affair with a man with whom he "had played the part of the woman".³¹

As a result of his homosexuality becoming known, G. continued, he was refused a promotion to become a *Carabinieri* officer. Furthermore, his brother spread the rumour in order to smear his reputation as much as possible and managed to manipulate their old father into writing a second will which excluded him: this is a precious proof of how dangerous it was to become a known homosexual, of the huge difference it could make in terms of career, reputation and family connections. G. became therefore

penniless, he did not even have the money to call his brother to court over their father’s will and had to ask for financial help. His brother thought that marriage with a rich, much older woman could be a way out of trouble for both and introduced him to a woman in her sixties, even offering to pay the wedding expenses. But this marriage, “immoral and horrible” [underlined in the original],³² did not take place as the bride-to-be withdrew. After that, G. was the recipient of some small amounts of money from his detested sibling: they allowed him to barely survive and were merely a humiliating gesture of pity.

Answering the question “But why?”³³ the title of the next section, G. proceeded to destroy his brother’s personality and reputation with a series of accusations: he was always aware of his wife having many lovers and was happy about it because in the meantime he could have sex with underage girls. Secondly, he was a greedy man who had been heard saying he could not wait to bury all of his wife’s relatives so that he could inherit their wealth. In addition, he did everything he could to encourage his sisters to use contraception (he would have even induced permanent sterility in them in the course of medical visits), in clear contradiction with Mussolini’s demographic campaigns.³⁴ Furthermore, he even procured an abortion to an underage girl and for this reason he had to appear in court.³⁵ He had always shown contempt towards his family, was ashamed of his farmer father, did not love his wife, did not spend time with his son, was neither friendly nor hospitable to his two sisters. His mottos were a crude and cynical vulgarisation of Darwinism:

the world belongs to cunning people, the destiny of the weak ones is to disappear (...). Conscience is the legacy of imbeciles. Religion is a bugbear, a constraint for the weak minds, laws were made for idiots, interests drive the world and in the world there are too many people, to have progress we would have to go back to a primitive state, Italy should not have more than 10 to 18 million inhabitants.³⁶

All these statements summed up his lack of morality, his brutality and cynicism, his defiance of the regime’s ideals and demographic campaign. G. wanted to show how hypocritical his brother was, how everything he said and did was immoral and against fascist directives, while, underneath the surface and beyond first impressions, G. was a much franker and more honest person, who had always shown strength of will, maturity and integrity.

Treated in the above-mentioned way, [his] youth destroyed, always contradicted, despised, insulted and slandered in public, deprived, disinherited, thrown out of home ... abandoned in poverty ... instigated to suicide³⁷

he was forced to emigrate, worked as a builder in France, later as a teacher in Cremona for a pitiful salary, then moved to Milan in search of a better job, but was now too old for state clerical jobs and could not go back into teaching because it was too late in the year to submit his application.³⁸ That was why G. went to see his brother: he had to ask for money, but only obtained a small sum together with these chilling words: "Don't ever come back to Turin ... otherwise I'll have you sent to *confino*. May I never see you again. Why are you waiting to shoot yourself behind the ears?"³⁹ G. could have called his lawyer about these threats but preferred addressing his brother's lawyer instead because he wanted to try to find an agreement outside the court. He concluded proposing a meeting in Milan, where he was planning to marry his landlady. This important last statement had to convincingly underline that his homosexuality belonged to the past, it was a concluded phase.

The *memoriale* was meant to make waves. To depict a known and respected fascist, one of the most famous doctors in town as a cynical, immoral, calculated, violent, manipulative, shrewd individual, to say he had committed crimes such as incitement to suicide, performing an abortion on an underage girl and inducing sterility on unaware patients would be explosive material. The underlying message that a self-proclaimed loyal fascist could be like that, must have worried readers, among them the King's Attorney, as the implication that the regime was relying on the support of this type of individual was an insult to Mussolini's society. G. pointed at the hypocrisy of a system that gave power and credit to those who accused him of immorality and yet appeared to him to be the most immoral ones. Furthermore, in demolishing his brother's fascist credentials, he capsized all accusations and expectations, and wrote that he was much more in line with the moral ideals indicated by the PNF. In his first letter to the Director of Collegno's asylum there is an even clearer statement in this sense:

I intend to use the right of defence that is granted to me by God and that is insuppressible by nature, deploying all the legal tools suggested by my religious and fascist conscience.⁴⁰

It is likely that G.’s intention to subvert common opinion, portraying himself as a model fascist Italian, irritated his readers and back-fired. After all, G.’s life-style pointed in a different direction, as highlighted earlier. It is however an interesting detail to understand what kind of strategy he thought could be effective in the situation.

Not only did G. claim his part of family inheritance, he also stated he was entitled to more money because he was never accorded the same treatment his brother had, due to his homosexuality. In one of the letters he wrote from Collegno, he reinstated the concept, specifying further: “For all these damages (...) don’t I deserve compensation?”⁴¹ The fact that G. felt disadvantaged and remarked the socio-economic consequences of discrimination was ahead of times. It must have sounded unreasonable, maybe even scandalous. Somebody who admitted homosexuality, declared he was unjustly treated because of it for all of his life and instead of humbly asking to be forgiven, demanded a sum of money for the suffering it had caused: one can just see the disgruntled expression of those who read his words in 1928.

Besides, the entire *memoriale* had a rather threatening underlying message: instead of showing remorse, with this piece of writing G. implicitly warned his brother that if he proceeded and pressed charges, if he kept refusing to give him his part of the inheritance, his crimes and misconduct would become public. Scandal was a weapon G. could handle too. So, not only did G., like many of his contemporaries, show knowledge of the regime’s key words (passive pederast/active homosexual, habitual/occasional homosexual, demographic campaigns, values such as family, religion, country); he also attempted to use this rhetoric to unmask those who hid behind it. From accused party, he wanted to become the accuser. The element of novelty of this position cannot be underestimated.

Faced with the very tangible possibility of another scandal after the court trial for allegedly performing an abortion on an under-age girl, his brother opted for the best strategy to invalidate any future accusations: a diagnosis of mental illness. That is why, when the police were called, he revealed the detail that he knew would push the security forces into sending G. to a psychiatric institution: his “homosexual tendencies”. As a doctor himself, he must have known that his words would not be challenged by the medical establishment and as a renowned fascist he probably felt even more protected. Internment was the infallible weapon to get rid of an unwanted relative.

To conclude, G.'s *memoriale* constitutes a unique document for its time. In it, G. shows he is aware of the regime's rhetoric and at the same time that he is prepared to fight his battle using his brother's weapons. He spends most of his words demolishing his brother's personality, exposing his lack of morality and adherence to fascist principles, exactly like he says his brother had done to him in the past. This is one of the reasons why this document is so unique: it shows the extent to which people under the regime had absorbed its rhetoric and modes, how they used defamation, accusations of immorality and Anti-fascism to get rid of opponents, how this type of behaviour had become normal routine. However, G.'s arguments on his homosexuality are equally crucial to understand a gay man's strategies for survival at the time. Whether he agreed or disagreed with psychiatric theories on homosexuality, he was ready and able to deploy them, in order to escape persecution, isolation, imprisonment or internment. It is another sign on how the fight among individuals had shaped itself on the regime's instilled ideology. His "coming out" must not be interpreted with present day parameters. It is an extreme tool of defence and it would have probably never happened in less traumatic circumstances. It was deployed only to demonstrate "diminished responsibility" factors. Yet, it could have also not taken place. In many cases this was the norm: accept accusations, not reply directly, try to diffuse them, avoid loud "scandalous" statements, impose self-censorship in the hope that it would mitigate punishment. In this respect, G. shows considerable courage and pride, as he does when he asks for compensation for the discrimination he suffered from. This aspect is the most authentically "modern" in the entire *memoriale*. It reveals a modernity of vision, a provocative tone and a challenging counter-reaction attitude that seems to belong to the post-Stonewall generation.

G. felt entitled to fight his battle relatively in the open, because of his social and cultural status, but also because he knew that, once his homosexuality surfaced and became known, he would have easily been cornered. Very few gay men and women were in a position as privileged as his. This does not diminish his courage and vigour, if anything it explains the silence that surrounded his words and underlines his achievement. Beyond the court-room rhetoric, the *memoriale* remains the moving testimony of a man who refused to be defeated and silenced, who took all his courage and fought against injustice and hypocrisy.

This chapter, entirely based on G.'s autobiographical piece of writing, illustrated the level of discrimination against homosexuals that could take

place within the family and its consequences in terms of work, career, reputation and relationships. The following chapter gives the rest of the picture and explains how the regime had managed, by 1928, to restrict all individuals’ freedoms, entering every aspect of their life.

NOTES

1. CA, G.’s *memoriale*, in G.’s medical file, 4***2.
2. Ibid. Pages 6 and 7 are missing.
3. Ebner, Michael, 2011, op. cit.; Giartosio, Tommaso and Goretti, Gianfranco, op. cit.
4. CA, G.’s *memoriale*, op. cit., p. 1.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 2.
7. Ibid., p. 2.
8. Ibid., p. 3.
9. Ibid., p. 4.
10. Ibid., p. 4.
11. Traditionally the wedding expenses in Italy are paid by the bride’s family.
12. CA, G.’s *memoriale*, op. cit., p. 8.
13. Ibid., p. 11.
14. See Chap. 2.
15. See Chap. 3.
16. “*L’Unico Mio Punto Nero*”, CA, G.’s *memoriale*, op. cit., p. 12.
17. Ibid.
18. Ebner, Michael. 2001, op. cit.
19. CA, G.’s *memoriale*, op. cit., p. 12.
20. See Chap. 2 and 5.
21. Aldrich, Robert. 1993. *The Seduction of the Mediterranean. Writing, Art and Homosexual Fantasy*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 175.
22. Ibid.
23. As explained in Chap. 2 and 5.
24. Aldrich, Robert, op. cit., p. 176.
25. See Chap. 2.
26. Romano, Gabriella, 2003 and 2001, op. cit.
27. Benadusi, Lorenzo, op. cit., p. 152.
28. See Chap. 2.
29. Benadusi, Lorenzo, op. cit., p. 186.
30. Aldrich, Robert, op. cit.
31. Romano, Gabriella, 2003, op. cit.
32. CA, G.’s *memoriale*, op. cit., p. 16.

33. “*Ma Perché?*”, Ibid., p. 18.
34. Contraception was declared illegal in 1930. However, the regime’s demographic programme and the Catholic Church had strongly campaigned against its use prior to that.
35. This case is discussed by his brother in an autobiographical book which cannot be mentioned. G.’s brother was tried and charged for having procured abortion on an underage girl and was therefore expelled from the PNF. He later appealed and was cleared of all charges. This is what G. refers to earlier when he says that his brother’s lawyer rescued him from a prison sentence.
36. CA, G.’s *memoriale*, op. cit., p. 24–25.
37. Ibid., p. 25.
38. The fact that G. only taught in private Catholic schools might be an indication of his non-alignment with the PNF: state secondary school teachers were forced to swear their loyalty to the party from 1931, but the discussion over the need for their “fascistisation” had started years before and was at its peak from 1927, as explained in Goetz, Helmut. 2000. *Il giuramento rifiutato. I docenti universitari e il regime fascista*. Milano: La Nuova Italia. I ed. 1993.
39. CA, G.’s *memoriale*, op. cit., p. 27.
40. CA, G.’s file n. 4***2, G.’s letter dated 15.12.1928, p. 3.
41. CA, op. cit., letter 16.3.1929, p. 4.

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