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*History of prisons and self-narration in early 20th-century Italy.  
The autobiography of a young gangster from Turin*

SUMMARY: 1. The origins of a prison autobiography – 2. To the reader's mercy – 3. Before the crime – 4. Crime (and female seduction) – 5. In prison (and beyond).

1. *The origins of a prison autobiography*

In December 1917, 17-year-old Francesco P.<sup>1</sup> (1900-?) was arrested in Turin as part of a police operation aimed at dismantling a gang of young criminals known as the Black Hand<sup>2</sup>. The investigation by the Piedmontese capital's police headquarters had been prompted by another investigation, that into the recent brutal murder of a fuel merchant, Maria Iraldi, who had been killed for the purpose of robbery by two teenagers in her shop in the central Corso Vinzaglio. Commissioner Amedeo Palma, an energetic official destined for a brilliant career in the state apparatus,<sup>3</sup> hypothesised that one of the murderers, 16-year-old Giuseppe Costantino, was the leader of a gang of thieves that had been very active in the Turin area since the previous summer. His associates and supporters were “un buon numero di giovanotti vagabondi<sup>4</sup>” aged between sixteen and twenty-four, who gathered in two disreputable bars, the Monviso and the Parigi, in the northern part of the city centre. Their thefts were generally directed against businesses, from which they stole money and items made of ivory and metal, which they then sold to their trusted fences, Stefano Marengo and Delfino Zucca. The police issued arrest warrants for the ten main suspects who, with the exception of Pietro Sclaverano, who was unavailable as he was serving in the Great War, were arrested and taken into custody at the Le Nuove prison.

<sup>1</sup> The young man's identity was made public by the Turin press. I considered it appropriate to conceal it in semi-anonymity, because the documentation examined brings to light sensitive personal data of a pathological nature.

<sup>2</sup> *Retata di giovani associati alla “Mano Nera”*, in «La Stampa», 20 December 1917, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> See A. Cifelli, *L'istituto prefettizio dalla caduta del fascismo all'Assemblea Costituente. I prefetti della Liberazione*, Scuola superiore dell'Amministrazione dell'Interno, Rome 2008, pp. 12, 14, 28-29, 80-82, 88.

<sup>4</sup> “A large number of young vagabonds”.

From that moment on, the so-called Black Hand case became the direct responsibility of the Turin judicial authorities. Francesco P. had been a central figure, an influential and very active member of the criminal organisation. His release from prison two days after his arrest,<sup>5</sup> due to a fortuitous procedural error, allowed him to go into hiding for three months. In March 1918, the police arrested him again, preventing him from evading the criminal proceedings being investigated by the Public Prosecutor's Office<sup>6</sup>. The young man was one of twelve actual or alleged members and accomplices of the gang tried by the Court of Turin the following July. The charges against him, supported by a vast amount of objective and testimonial evidence, were very serious: two counts of fraud, thirteen counts of simple and aggravated theft, and criminal association. Unlike his co-defendants, Francesco P. rejected all charges, protesting that he had been slandered by criminals whom he claimed to know only superficially or by sight; their confessions implicating him as an accomplice, if not the mastermind of the group's crimes, were false and inspired by unjust personal malice. His self-defence was not only ineffective but also counterproductive due to his aggressive behaviour, bordering on insolence, towards the other participants in the public trial. The court therefore sentenced him to six years and nine months in prison, imposing a prison sentence one year longer than the prosecution had requested. The sentence was upheld on appeal in January 1919 and became enforceable after the Court of Cassation reviewed its legitimacy three months later.<sup>7</sup>

Francesco P. was imprisoned at Le Nuove between March 1918 and February 1920, when he was transferred for undocumented reasons to the Royal Penitentiary of Oneglia, one of the Ligurian towns that merged in 1923 to form the new municipality of Imperia. His detention in the Turin prison represented a very critical phase in his life, culminating in an attempted suicide, most likely in early 1919<sup>8</sup>. In July 1918, the young man saw his hopes of early release fade when he volunteered for the Italian

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<sup>5</sup> See Turin State Archive, Sezioni Riunite (hereinafer ASTo, SR), *Casa circondariale di Torino "Le Nuove"*, I.1.9, n. 5457.

<sup>6</sup> For the documents, see ASTo, SR., *Tribunale di Torino*, Criminal case files, 1918, bundle 156/A.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the young man received at least two other convictions for theft in two collateral proceedings before the Courts of Turin and Pinerolo; for the documents of the first, see *ibid.*, 1918, bundle 133/A, file 1257.

<sup>8</sup> The object used, a piece of glass, is preserved by the University of Turin, cf. University Museum System, Lombroso Museum (hereinafter IT SMAUT, ML), 839/5.

army engaged in war operations<sup>9</sup>. Life in prison caused him great distress, which in his first year of imprisonment cost him four punitive measures for disciplinary offences such as “schiamazzi” and “profitto illecito sui compagni<sup>10</sup>”<sup>11</sup>. His relationship with his family, already complicated between 1916 and 1917 by his departure from his father’s house and the first vague reports of a theft he had committed, deteriorated further after the trial clarified the extent and nature of his criminal activities. Against this backdrop, Fernanda Molino, the sister of his mother Maddalena, harshly criticised his choice of a life of crime, which had nullified his parents’ educational efforts and plunged him “nell’onta, nell’abisso”<sup>12</sup>. The strong pressures from inside and outside the prison must have contributed to the young man’s mental disorder, which manifested itself in loss of sleep and hallucinatory visions of his aunt as his incestuous lover and executioner.

The prison administration was called upon to respond to issues related to Francesco P.’s mental state, perhaps following his attempted suicide, and certainly following his rash request. In January 1919, the prisoner sent a threatening letter to the director of the Nuove prison, ordering him to prevent Molino from visiting him in his cell, as she had done on many previous nights, to love him and subject him to painful and unhealthy electric shocks: “I am powerful with the black hand, [you] better behave or [I will] blow you up”<sup>13</sup>. Three days after it was written, the director forwarded the delusional message to the prison doctor, Mario Carrara, urging him to provide medical assistance to the young man. The criminologist, an academic true to the scientific teachings of his mentor and late father-in-law Cesare Lombroso, whose eldest daughter Paola he had married,<sup>14</sup> took an interest in his case for the entire year that followed. The therapies administered to him on the basis of an unknown diagnosis must have produced an improvement in his psycho-emotional condition. Francesco P. developed feelings of trust towards the criminologist, perceiving him – as he should have been – as a rare institutional figure who was not hostile, but respectful and even benevolent;<sup>15</sup> the many

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Maddalena and Celeste P. to Francesco P., Turin, 21 July 1918, *ibid.*, 839/3.2.

<sup>10</sup> “Chatter”; “illicit profit from his fellow prisoners”.

<sup>11</sup> See ASTo, SR, *Casa circondariale di Torino “Le Nuove”*, I.1.11, no. 7290.

<sup>12</sup> “Into disgrace, into the abyss”. Cf. F. Molino to Francesco P., Turin, 14 July 1918, IT SMAUT, ML, 839/3.1.

<sup>13</sup> Francesco P. to the director of *Nuove*, Turin, 6 January 1919, *ibid.*, 839/3.4.

<sup>14</sup> See F. Capozzi, *Mario Carrara, l’erede di Lombroso che non giurò fedeltà al fascismo*, in «Rivista di Storia dell’Università di Torino», 10 (2021), 2, pp. 35-51.

<sup>15</sup> See Francesco P. to M. Carrara, Turin [before 6 February 1920], in IT SMAUT, ML,

“courtesies” he received in the context of their relationship also included an intervention with the prison administration to have him relieved of a penalty for a disciplinary offence imposed on him by a prison officer.

Carrara studied Francesco P.’s personality – not only through interviews in the Nuove prison infirmary – but also through manuscripts he had written and owned, persuading him above all to write a torrential autobiographical memoir entitled *La vita che vissi* (The Life I Lived). His analytical approach reflected a dominant psychiatric-criminological knowledge defined by Lombroso and other international specialists, which attributed to writing the function of a key to accessing the psychology of so-called deviants<sup>16</sup>. Lombrosian criminology examined prisoners’ writings using the tools of literary criticism and ethnography, linguistics and graphology, with the same logic with which it used anthropometry to scrutinise their bodies<sup>17</sup>. Its practitioners sought out alleged graphic, lexical and content anomalies – i.e. the narration of conduct that deviated from the behavioural standards of bourgeois culture – hypothesising that these were revealing and sometimes even partially explanatory of the authors’ propensity for crime. However, the prisoners’ ego-documents studied by specialists do not offer today’s researchers a source that is useful only for investigations into the history of criminology between the 19th and 20th centuries<sup>18</sup>.

Carrara kept Francesco P.’s autobiography at the Museum of Criminal Anthropology at the University of Turin, which he had taken over four years after the death of its founder Lombroso in 1913. The manuscript is still kept in the museum’s archive in a huge, still little-known 19th- and

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839/3.3.

<sup>16</sup> P. Artières, *Clinique de l’écriture. Une histoire de l’égard médical sur l’écriture*, Paris 2013. See also D. Galeano, *Beautiful Poems and Dirty Literature: Criminological Readings of Mass Culture in South America*, in S. Montaldo and F. Orlandi (curr. by), *Lombroso in the Americas. A Transatlantic History of a Controversial Criminologist*, London 2025, pp. 133-144.

<sup>17</sup> See P. Leschiutta, *Palimsesti del carcere. Cesare Lombroso e le scritture proibite*, Naples 1996; F. Merlo, *Gli studi grafologici di Cesare Lombroso. Usi scientifici e destinazione editoriali della collezione di autografi dei devianti del Museo di Antropologia Criminale di Torino*, in «Nuova Rivista Storica», 106 (2022), pp. 805-836; E. D’Antonio, *Gli studi sui gerghi, in Museo Lombroso. Il Museo di antropologia criminale “Cesare Lombroso” dell’Università di Torino*, edited by S. Montaldo and C. Cilli, Turin 2024, pp. 65-70.

<sup>18</sup> See S. Montaldo, *Vidas perdidas. Escritos autobiográficos de presos en la antropología criminal de Cesare Lombroso*, unpublished paper presented at the conference *A tinta e o cárcere, Escritos de presos políticos e comuns (séculos XIX-XX)*, PUC, Rio de Janeiro, 5 September 2025.

20th-century collection called “Scritti di detenuti<sup>19</sup>”, which contains personal documents produced – with a few exceptions – by Italian citizens imprisoned in the peninsula’s prisons<sup>20</sup>. The aim of this essay is to analyse it as a source for the history of Italian prisons in the early 20th century. The perspective of the investigation focuses on the subjectivity of the author, concentrating on the impact of the mechanisms and dynamics of the prison institution on his personal history and experience. The writing of the memoir at the invitation of the criminologist was encouraged (also) by the hope of possible positive repercussions on his prison conditions; for example, the young man expressed his desire to access prison work consistent with his professional vocation as a technical-industrial designer<sup>21</sup>. However, the hope that Carrara would mediate his requests with the administration of the Nuove prison did not lead him to give him an improbable, edifying account of his personal redemption in prison. Rather, his memoir offers a retrospective rationalisation of his existential, criminal and prison experience, filtered through a pessimistic view of the world that he had developed since entering the penitentiary.

## 2. *To the reader’s mercy*

In the short preface, Francesco P. addressed the hypothetical audience of *La vita che vissi*, clarifying the objectives of the “humble writing” dedicated to its commissioner and only actual reader, the “Most Illustrious Professor M. Carrara”<sup>22</sup>. The text was not intended to provoke moral condemnation of the author, who had already developed the “awareness” of being simply “a victim of himself”. Readers had to approach it with the rationality of “physiologists”, aware that man was “a machine driven by the brain”. The brain was the organ that regulated human sensitivity, determining the modes of individual action aimed at achieving a goal.

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<sup>19</sup> “Writing of prisoners”.

<sup>20</sup> Francesco P., *La vita che vissi*, [Turin 1919], in IT SMAUT, ML, 839/1. For an introduction to the collection, see V. Borges, P. Artières, *Gli scritti dei detenuti*, in *Museo Lombroso*, cit., pp. 159-161.

<sup>21</sup> For an essay on eight of his graphic designs for industrial machinery submitted to Carrara for evaluation, see IT SMAUT, ML, 839/4.

<sup>22</sup> Francesco P., *La vita che vissi*, p. 1. For the dedication to the criminologist, *ibid.*, p. 160.

“Le azioni squilibrate<sup>23</sup>” were therefore not the product of a man’s immorality, but of a brain dysfunction that made him too weak to conform his conduct to the principles of justice. The prisoner had explained to the “reader” the organic causes of criminal behaviour in order to make him understand his misdeeds, but also to induce him to feel “clemenza, e [...] perdono<sup>24</sup>” towards him; his criminological “theories” would not persuade all readers, but even sceptics would learn “la pura verità, tutta la verità<sup>25</sup>” about his story.

The 160-page memoir was conceived as a true literary work which, after the preface, interspersed autobiographical narration with philosophical and sociological digressions on themes and issues relating to the author’s existential experience. The autobiographies of “delinquents”, Lombroso taught, expressed through writing individualities exacerbated by “dolore del carcere” and “mal soffocate passioni”, but above all driven by an overbearing “vanità<sup>26</sup>”. Although his text was not spontaneous, Francesco P. showed himself to be self-satisfied with his own erudition, quoting many, perhaps too many, verses, mostly by Italian romantic poets, at the end of reflections on real-life events or social, cultural and political phenomena. The lyrical inserts complicated a chronologically ordered textual structure, which was already rather articulated and discontinuous in itself; the story was also characterised by a noticeable stylistic shift, exhibiting for a long stretch a lucid, highly refined and even luxuriant style of writing, which in the concluding part became hasty and muddled to the point of obscurity. The young man did not necessarily abuse the passages from the compositions of Giuseppe Giusti, Francesco Domenico Guerrazzi, Giovanni Pascoli and many others out of “vanity”; he was more simply a passionate reader of their works and an amateur lover of poetry<sup>27</sup>. His level of education and cultural background appear to be fairly good overall compared to those of most of the prison population of the time and his peers from families of similar social status.

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<sup>23</sup> “Unbalanced actions”.

<sup>24</sup> “Clemency and [...] forgiveness”.

<sup>25</sup> “The pure truth, the whole truth”.

<sup>26</sup> “The pain of prison”; “ill-suppressed passions”; “vanity”.

<sup>27</sup> See C. Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente in rapporto all'antropologia, alla giurisprudenza e alle discipline carcerarie. Fifth edition*, vol. I, Bocca, Turin 1896, p. 595.

<sup>27</sup> For three of his compositions sent to Carrara, see IT/SMAUT, ML, 839/2.

### 3. *Before the crime*

In his autobiography, Francesco P. devoted a great deal of space to his childhood memories, beginning with the story of his stay with his maternal grandparents in San Rocchetto, a hillside hamlet in the rural centre of Ferrere d'Asti, between 1904 and 1905. His parents, Celeste and Maddalena, had temporarily entrusted him to relatives on the eve of a work stay in Arona, which would take them away from Turin for a year. In the first decade of the 20th century, the P. family, residing at 150 Corso Regina Margherita, in the popular Turin neighbourhood of Borgo Dora, was experiencing an improvement in its modest socio-economic conditions. His father was a former bricklayer and textile worker who, after returning to the Piedmontese capital, obtained his driving licence and became a chauffeur and factotum for an industrialist.

Celeste P.'s son only learned that his father had problems with the law when he was young from an older fellow prisoner at Nuove. Carlo Satragni, an influential figure in the Turin underworld in the early 20th century, revealed to him that his father had been charged with "attempted murder" but had been acquitted on the basis of a psychiatric report by "Professor Lombroso". Francesco P. was not particularly upset by this, because he knew his father's irascibility, believed it was legitimate to stab a provocateur and, in any case, the trial had ended with a verdict in favour of the defendant<sup>28</sup>. In any case, his father's turbulent past had been behind him for two decades, buried by the new serenity achieved through marriage and a more lucrative and satisfying job than his previous ones.

The P. family did not provide the breeding ground for their only offspring's vocation as a criminal. His memoir paints a somewhat romanticised picture of a childhood with many bright spots and a few dark ones, marked by a suicide attempt, running away from home and a troubled stay at the Cottolengo Hospital, but also by remarkable educational success in the first three years of compulsory primary school<sup>29</sup>. His parents had devoted "the best care" to his education, conceived as part of a broader educational project aimed at providing him with good prospects for socio-economic self-fulfilment in adulthood. Francesco

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<sup>28</sup> Francesco P., *La vita che vissi*, p. 154. For the acts of violence perpetrated by his father, see *Coltellate immaginarie*, in "La Stampa – Gazzetta piemontese", 7 October 1896, p. 4; *Cronaca spicciola. La cronaca del vino*, *ibid.*, 25 January 1897, p. 3; *Le ferite degli "sconosciuti"*, *ibid.*, 18 October 1897, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Francesco P., *La vita che vissi*, pp. 17-85.

P. made no secret of his preference for his loving mother over his strict father, whose “beatings” and punishments he believed had contributed to exacerbating his naturally restless nature. However, the teachers at Valdocco in Borgo Dora, now the De Amicis Comprehensive School, initially considered him one of the best pupils precisely because of his father’s supervision. Celeste P. had taught him to read and write and, after he started school, had continued to take an interest in his studies. His decline in performance from the fourth grade onwards, as he would later write, was due to his increasingly unruly and hostile attitude towards his classmates and teachers, especially those he perceived as hostile and/or unjust towards him. The fact that excelling in a fight satisfied him more than getting a good grade not only exacerbated his conflict with his father’s authority. The child, marginalised at school, had to be transferred to the Federico Sclopis schools, located in the central Via del Carmine; the reputation as a tough guy that he continued to cultivate even in his new school did not prevent him from obtaining his primary school certificate around 1911.

The liberal-conservative Celeste P., who shared stereotypes rooted in contemporary bourgeois culture, believed that the consumption of “adventure, detective, etc.” novels and films corrupted young people, spreading deviant lifestyles among them<sup>30</sup>. For some time, his son had been secretly indulging in the “nefando veleno<sup>31</sup>” of these products of mass culture, but he did not disdain the more edifying cultural consumption offered by his father. In his autobiography, Francesco P. wrote at length about their first visit to the 1911 International Exhibition in Turin, conceiving and recounting it as a real turning point in his life<sup>32</sup>. His deep fascination with the discoveries of technical and scientific progress had prompted him to return there many times with his father, other family members and even alone. The strong interest in mechanical arts that he developed in that context led him to imagine his future as the owner of a workshop or a technical draughtsman. However, his visits to the pavilions also provoked emotions which, in hindsight, had a negative influence

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<sup>30</sup> On this hostile view of mass culture, see D. Kalifa, *L'encre et le sang. Récits de crimes et société à la Belle Époque*, Paris 1995, pp. 199-219. For the psychiatric-criminological perspective, see M.U. Masini, G. Vidoni, *Il cinematografo nel campo delle malattie mentali e della criminalità*, in «Archivio di Antropologia criminale, Psichiatria e Medicina legale», 36 (1915), 5-6, pp. 617-629.

<sup>31</sup> “Nefarious poison”.

<sup>32</sup> Francesco P., *La vita che vissi*, pp. 91-102. On this impressive event, see P. Balocco, *L'Esposizione Internazionale di Torino del 1911*, Turin 2011.

on his life. Firstly, the young man discovered that he felt an immoderate attraction to women, to whom – as we shall see – he would in fact attribute a decisive role in his initiation into crime. On the other hand, the lack of money needed to buy the most admired artefacts made him aware that he was “poor”; his self-awareness of his status led him to develop, during his imprisonment, an unpolitical critique of the structures of Italian society, fuelled by feelings of aversion towards the wealthy classes, or at least towards that part of the wealthy classes that he considered unproductive for the rest of the country.

In 1912, Francesco P. left school of his own accord, intent on implementing the life plan that, in hindsight, he would consider to have matured the previous year in the pavilions of the International Exhibition. The young man intended to pursue his professional vocation, combining daytime work in the workshop with evening classes in technical and industrial design at private institutes. His father encouraged his initiative by setting up a small workshop in the outbuildings of their home on Corso Regina Margherita where he could practise the mechanical arts. However, his experience in the workshop was characterised, as he would recall in his memoir, by constant, voluntary job insecurity; his inability to cope with the boredom, pressures and conflicts of the work routine led him to resign after a few months from the company that had hired him, quickly finding new employment elsewhere.

His commitment to technical education declined in parallel with that devoted to the workshop, partly, he would argue, as a consequence of a serious accident he suffered while working for a FIAT supplier. From 1914 onwards, Francesco P. preferred to spend his evenings at the cinema rather than attending vocational courses; the films he went to see with “alcuni cattivi compagni” “some bad companions”, in his opinion, had a negative influence on him, “[sconvolgendogli] il cervello” and thus making him “più facile preda del male”<sup>33</sup>. In 1915, Italy’s entry into the First World War, he would also claim, made a further indirect contribution to undermining his balance, depriving him of his father’s disciplining presence; 48-year-old Celeste P. was called up for military service, leaving his son alone with his mother to take care of the family. Francesco P.’s criminal career had not yet begun, but his brain had already been weakened by tendencies and habits accumulated during his upbringing, which would make him almost predestined for crime.

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<sup>33</sup> “Some bad companions”; “[upsetting] the mind”; “more susceptible to evil”.

#### 4. *Crime (and female seduction)*

In his autobiography, Francesco P. was very evasive about his involvement in the so-called Black Hand gang<sup>34</sup>. The story hinted at the alleged circumstances of his integration into the “combriccola [...] di malfattori<sup>35</sup>”, suggesting that he had been induced by a friend, Giovanni Grosso-Richetta, in the name of their mutual need to survive in Turin, where they had been left without any points of reference. The two had long been a pair of habitual thieves and had been arrested after being caught red-handed with stolen goods from an inn in Chivasso. Their return to the city after escaping from prison in the Piedmontese town had left them with the problem of finding a means of subsistence. Rejected by his family, “persecuted by everyone and also hungry”, Francesco P. allowed himself to be led astray by his partner, who already had connections with the group of criminals: “essi mi presero mi ristorarono e in compenso mi domandarono di fare la guardia quando loro avrebbero fatto dei furti, potevo ricusare?<sup>36</sup>”. The young man could not write more about the Black Hand, not only because, having played only a passive role as a lookout, he did not know much about its activities: “questo mio passato” – he wrote – “mi fa ribrezzo”<sup>37</sup>.

The expression of repentance expressed in this judgement of himself was most likely genuine. At the same time, however, Francesco P. offered an inaccurate account of the facts, which diminished the extent of his involvement in the criminal organisation in Carrara’s eyes. According to the trial findings, he joined the gang a couple of months before mid-November 1917, when he escaped from Chivasso prison<sup>38</sup>. His participation in the planning and execution of the thefts, on the other hand, has been ascertained at least since the beginning of September

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<sup>34</sup> Francesco P., *La vita che vissi*, pp. 143-145. The name Mano nera (Black Hand) was borrowed from the notorious Italian-American criminal organisation, whose actions had already been the subject of intense media attention, including in Italy. The sources do not clarify whether and to what extent the Turin gang officially identified with this name; at the trial hearing on 11 July 1918, fellow member Giovanni Grosso-Richetta testified that he had used it only once, while drunk, to claim responsibility for a theft committed with Francesco P., cf. ASTO, SR, *Tribunale di Torino*, Criminal case files, 1918, bundle 156/A.

<sup>35</sup> “Gang [...] of criminals”.

<sup>36</sup> “They took me in and fed me, and in return they asked me to stand guard while they committed thefts. Could I refuse?”.

<sup>37</sup> “My past disgusts me”.

<sup>38</sup> See the sub-file relating to the theft against Agnese Bostricco, *ibid.*

of that year. The young man had led his associates Grosso-Richetta, Costantino, Sclaverano and Agostino Taningher four times to a factory in bankruptcy proceedings to steal bronze objects<sup>39</sup>, which were then sold to a trusted fence.

The memoir was as elusive about his experience in the so-called Black Hand as it was rich in information about the thefts committed prior to joining the association. The account of the crimes was very detailed, but not always reliable and, above all, characterised by an attempt to explain them in a self-exonerating manner. Francesco P. recounted that in 1917 – as was indeed the case – he had experienced a real escalation in criminal activity, after he had begun to regularly steal small amounts of money from his family since the end of 1915. His links with two fellow criminals of the same age – first a certain Enrico Ghersi and then his former vocational school classmate Grosso-Richetta, an electrician who already owned a revolver<sup>40</sup> – had encouraged him to extend his sphere of activity beyond the domestic sphere. The robberies carried out with one or the other had targeted, among other things, various taverns in suburban areas, whose owners had been robbed of money, jewellery, metal objects and billiard balls. In August 1917, the owner of an inn in Ferrere d’Asti recognised and reported the young man, whom she knew because he had relatives in the village, thus attracting the attention of the public authorities for the first time<sup>41</sup>. His transformation into a habitual thief – he would later claim – had undoubtedly been influenced by bad company; however, the decisive factor in his “moral metamorphosis” was another, much more powerful one.

Francesco P. had already stated that, since the age of eleven, he had been dominated by an impetuous desire for physical possession of women. The concrete possibilities of satisfying this desire only matured between the end of 1915 and 1916, following his encounter with two seductresses, one involuntary and the other deliberate. The narrative not only highlighted the temporal coincidence between his infatuations and the decisive turning points in his criminal career, but also conceived the latter as a result of female influence. In short, he was not responsible for his criminality, even though he admitted to having succumbed to the psychological tendency he defined as “womanising”; rather, the women he loved had permanently deconstructed his brain, making him capable

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<sup>39</sup> See Costantino’s testimony at the trial hearing of 11 July 1918, *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> See *ibid.*, 1918, bundle 133/A, file no. 1257.

<sup>41</sup> See *ibid.*, 1918, bundle 156/A.

of any action to please them. His first domestic thefts were motivated by the desire to obtain the money necessary to make himself attractive to a “seductress” who showed no interest in him and would reject him: “la donna è l’animale, più brutale che esista – the young men commented - perché con una parola distrugge la vera felicità della vita di un uomo”<sup>42</sup>. The first encounter marked the beginning of his thieving activities, while the second turned him into a habitual criminal and a gangster.

Francesco P. described a certain Bianca as “la causa diretta della [propria] rovina”, who had “spinto alla delittuosa [sua] esistenza”<sup>43</sup>. The two had met and fallen in love in 1916 at a theatre soirée and, after a pleasure trip to Genoa, had begun living together under false names in Turin. The woman was a 22-year-old courtesan of Sardinian origin, who had until then lived in the comfort afforded her by her lovers, which the young man could not offer her. The couple initially decided to support themselves by working, but their earnings were insufficient to maintain the hedonistic lifestyle that the woman expected. In the meantime, Francesco P., who had begun to consume alcohol and cocaine, gave in to Bianca’s pressure and began to steal with Ghersi in order to increase his financial resources. But it still wasn’t enough: the woman, still unsatisfied, decided in 1917 to leave her partner, disappearing from his life with all the money and movable property in their home. The definitive entry into the underworld, at the suggestion of Grosso-Richetta, would be the only possible way out of the existential precariousness into which his fleeing lover had plunged him.

The woman was therefore always – whether she was a *cocotte* or an unwitting seductress – an agent of cerebral subversion of a man and therefore a decisive factor in criminogenesis. The autobiographical narrative – it should be noted – leaves room for doubt as to the reliability of the reconstruction of the facts. In reality, the young man kept himself busy in various workshops in Turin until September 1917<sup>44</sup>, when his first documented actions with the Black Hand took place. The absence of external evidence on the figure of Bianca, on the other hand, may lead one to doubt even the very existence of the seductress, thereby refuting the entire account of his entry into the underworld. Whether she existed or not, Francesco P. resorted in any case to a (self-absolving) explanation

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<sup>42</sup> “Women are the most brutal animals that exist, because with a single word they can destroy the true happiness of a man’s life”.

<sup>43</sup> “The direct cause of [his] ruin”; “pushed him into [his] criminal existence”.

<sup>44</sup> See his *Libretto paga*, in ASTo, SR, *Tribunale di Torino*, Criminal case files, 1918, bundle 156/A.

of his descent into crime, which appears common in the autobiographies of prisoners in the early 20th century. Prisoners who admitted their guilt claimed to be essentially not responsible for their crimes, some because they were driven by hereditary psychopathologies<sup>45</sup>, others by economic and/or socio-political pressures<sup>46</sup>, and many because they were brainwashed by voracious and ruthless *belles dames sans merci*<sup>47</sup>. It is not possible to determine here whether the ideal of masculinity that emerges from these narratives mobilises a stereotype typical of the subculture of the prison population or reflects a generic view of gender relations widespread in contemporary bourgeois culture.

### 5. *In prison (and beyond)*

Francesco P. concluded his memoir with a long, bitter reflection on his prison experience and its impact on his future outside prison<sup>48</sup>. This theme is not frequently addressed in the autobiographies of prisoners preserved at the Lombroso Museum. The young man considered the attitude of the institutions towards him and his fellow prisoners to be morally demeaning. The magistrates who had judged him had, first of all, committed a grave injustice against him by sentencing him, even though he was still a minor at the time of the sentence, to serve his sentence in the Nuove prison rather than in a reformatory: “io credo perciò che i giudici si infischino del codice penale [...], adesso so che “La legge è uguale per tutti, ma non tutti sono uguali per la legge”<sup>49</sup>.

The prison institutions were worse than the already “molto scalcinata”<sup>50</sup> Italian justice system. Francesco P. used to sing to relieve himself

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<sup>45</sup> See E. D’Antonio, *Il detenuto e il criminologo. Un (mancato) intervento criminologico di Cesare Lombroso in un caso criminale nella Svizzera del primo Novecento*, in A. Fadelli, P. Goi, S. Miotto (curr. by), *Liber librum aperit. Studi in memoria di Andrea Marcon (1974-2024)*, Pordenone 2025 – publication currently in press.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Orlando P., *Mie disgrazie e peripezie della vita*, Turin, 10 September 1921, in IT/SMAUT, ML, 879/1.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Lucio F., [*Autobiography*, Turin, June 1920,] in IT SMAUT, ML, 855/1; Pasquale R., *Autobiographical notes*, Turin [1929-30], in IT/SMAUT, ML, 913/1.

<sup>48</sup> Francesco P., *La vita che vissi*, pp. 146-155.

<sup>49</sup> “I therefore believe that the judges do not care about the penal code [...], now I know that ‘the law is the same for everyone, but not everyone is equal before the law’.

<sup>50</sup> “Very shabby”.

from the pains of life and the pangs of hunger, but the rules of the Nuove prison did not allow it; the prison administration, keen to enforce it, had therefore punished him several times, going so far as to threaten to tie him to the restraint bed if he did not stop singing. The prison officers were – except for one of the seventy-eight on duty at the Nuove – violent, cowardly men, ready to abuse their power over the prisoners. The guards had repeatedly searched him in a manner contrary to the regulations, stealing or destroying items belonging to him, including the memoir intended for Carrara. However, for him, the issue had much wider and more serious implications than the specific conduct of the management and prison guards.

Francesco P. believed he was in “a very critical position” because his imprisonment was not proving to be a measure of temporary social segregation but rather “the suppression of [his] future”. Prison had caused him to lose eight kilograms in weight and was preventing him from working according to his “inclinations” and professional skills already acquired; the possibility of doing prison work in line with the latter was linked to the hope of not having to start his apprenticeship all over again once he was released. The young man feared that his release from prison would impose on him a process of social reintegration that would be as difficult as his professional reintegration; his mother was ill and might die, while his father might not want to see him again. The only certainties he had were that he would try to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of the world and that he would take revenge on the woman he believed to be the cause of his misfortunes.

*[Quando] avrò finito la mia condanna, [...] quella sgualdrina d'una Bianca avrà pur finito di darsi al sollazzo, non voglio mica con questo significare che io le tolga la vita, mi contenterò di toglierle i godimenti della vita, e [...] la farò piegare il fiero capo sotto un nodo indissolubile, la costringerò a sposare cioè chi voglio [Io] di quella donna posseggo prove e fatti antecedenti alla mia e sua convivenza che basterebbero a segregarla per qualche paio d'anni dalla società<sup>51</sup>.*

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<sup>51</sup> “[When] I have served my sentence, [...] that slut Bianca will have finished indulging in her pleasures. I do not mean to say that I will take her life, I will be content to take away her enjoyment of life, and [...] I will make her bow her proud head under an indissoluble knot, I will force her to marry whoever I want. I have evidence and facts about that woman prior to our cohabitation that would be enough to segregate her from society for a couple of years”.