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A Renewed Interest in Violet Gibson's Mental Health

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ABSTRACT

A Renewed Interest in Violet Gibson's Mental Health

This short communication highlights the recent historiographical interest in the shooting of the Duce Benito Mussolini in 1926, carried out by the Anglo-Irish woman Violet Gibson. A psychiatric report was compiled by two famous Italian phrenologists, Sante de Sanctis and Augusto Giannelli. The Court took their judgment into account, and the accused was declared incompetent. However, things would soon change with the introduction of the Rocco Code (1930), which was less open-minded in accepting the principles of positivistic psychological determinism.

Keywords: Shooting of Benito Mussolini - Psychiatric report - Sante de Sanctis

The story

In the last two years, perhaps by chance, there have been two new works providing further insight into the personality of Violet Albina Gibson, the Irish woman who shot the Duce Benito Mussolini in 1926, and into the reasons that led her to the insane gesture.

On April 7, a woman fired a revolver in the face of the Head of Government HE Mussolini as he came out of the Capitol, where he had inaugurated the International Congress of Surgeons, fortunately only grazing the bridge of his nose¹.

The first of these works is an Irish docudrama, *Violet Gibson, The Irish Woman Who Shot Mussolini* (2020), and the second is an Italian historical-psychological book of collected essays (2021). The documentary screened last year on TG4, an Irish language FTA public service television network, and the filmmaker Barrie Dowdall commented:

It is estimated that at least three million deaths can be directly attributed to Mussolini's policies and warmongering. But for a millimeter or two and a dodgy bullet, Violet might have changed the course of world history².

Gibson was arrested after the failed assassination attempt, but as her gesture was considered insane and without political motives, she was hospitalized in a Roman asylum and later transferred to St. Andrew's Hospital in Northampton, where she remained until her death in 1956.

The book entitled *7 Aprile 1926. Attentato al duce. Violet Gibson capace di intendere e di volere?*, edited by Giovanni Pietro Lombardo³, aims to do justice to this historical event – which is also relevant for the history of psychology – the historiography of which has never been thoroughly investigated. It is a question of reconstructing the *humus* (and therefore the set of political, social, cultural, spiritual, religious factors, etc.) in which this assassination attempt on the Duce was conceived.

The contributions in the book provide important information on the life of Violet, who came from an aristocratic family, spending her youth between Dublin and London, and making her debut at Queen Victoria's court. Moreover, these essays reconstruct her time in Rome before the shooting, in light of the testimonies of staff at the psychiatric hospital where she was hospitalized, and of letters written by Violet herself (G. Romano)⁴. In this context, important names also emerge from the legal world, not least the jurist Enrico Ferri, who was one of the first to lean towards the theory that Gibson was mentally ill, thereby rejecting the theory that her gesture was politically motivated (Lombardo and Tessitore)⁵. One chapter (R. De Longis) examines how the press reported the attacks on the Duce (there were four attempts on Mussolini's life, all skillfully exploited by the fascist propaganda campaign), from which we can clearly see the effort that was made to make the Duce appear invulnerable, firmly con-

vinced that the upward march of fascism would continue⁶. With regard to the history of psychology, an expert (Lombardo) analyzes the process undertaken to determine whether Violet was in full possession of her faculties, concluding with his opinion of the evaluation of Violet Gibson's mental illness.

The highlight of this collection of essays is an appendix, in which the psychiatric report on Gibson is fully transcribed. It was conducted by two luminaries of the Italian psychiatric nosography, Sante de Sanctis and Augusto Giannelli, the first of whom was appointed as an expert by the Gibson family. De Sanctis had also organized the 5th International Congress of Psychology in Rome in 1905, and was one of the founders of Italian experimental psychology and child neuropsychiatry, with particular focus on child and adolescent psychiatry. Following the success of the aforementioned congress, the Minister of Education Leonardo Bianchi announced a competition for three professorships in psychology, the first ever to be established in Italian universities. De Sanctis accepted the appointment as Professor of Experimental Psychology in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Rome, where in 1907 he founded the first Italian Laboratory of Experimental Psychology⁷. Giannelli, a court expert, was the Director of the provincial asylum Santa Maria della Pietà in Sant' Onofrio, Rome. This story could easily be classified as crime fiction, as the plot is laced with *elements* of mystery. It is no coincidence that the editor of the collected essays clearly states that he wanted to adopt a historical-circumstantial approach, and all mystery novels are about solving a puzzle by collecting clues, researching the causes, and formulating hypotheses on the motive and culprit. The elements of a detective novel are as follows.

The place

There are many places in Violet's story, all of which are very suggestive. The locations help to shed light on the political-institutional climate of the time, and to create a timeline of the shooter's life events. The story starts in her native land and ends Rome, with an episode in Munich in the middle, where the protagonist, frequenting the city's Steinerian theosophical and anthroposophical circles, met Duke Giovanni Antonio Colonna di Cesarò in 1912. But it is, above all, the Italian capital that stands out, with its lights and shadows, lending itself to various conjectures: it is a question of following the various places that Violet stayed in (not all of which were clarified in the expert report) – she mostly chose places with a Catholic environment (nunneries), perhaps for protection reasons – and this behavior denotes a complex and convoluted coming and going; a clear symptom of the shooter's restless nature.

The main characters

Naturally, we start with the protagonist. In this regard, a *caesura* can be established between a *before* and an *after* the shooting; with regard to the "before", it is natural

to ask oneself about the reasons why Gibson – ever since she had been in London – showed such great interest in Italian affairs, in the killing of Don Giovanni Minzoni (an anti-fascist Catholic priest killed in 1923), and in the murder of Giacomo Matteotti, the trial for which, held in the court of Chieti, Violet followed with extreme assiduity. Step by step, the story follows the psychotic behavior that Gibson had already exhibited in England, so even before moving to Rome, with hospitalizations for suicide attempts and serious nervous breakdowns, and, in particular, her admission to the “Villa Giuseppina” clinic for alienated women in Rome, before the shooting took place, where Violet was declared to be suffering from “mystical delirium” by the psychiatrist Antonio Mendicini, a friend of Sante de Sanctis. There are two threads to the “after” story: the first is the technical-scientific aspect, with a careful examination of the report written by the two illustrious psychiatrists; the second is the reconstruction of Gibson’s life as a recluse, first in the Mantellate prison and later in the asylum in Sant’Onofrio, right through to her repatriation to the UK, where she remained at St Andrew’s hospital until her death 30 years later.

The co-star is Duke Giovanni Antonio Colonna di Cesarò, who Violet met in Munich’s anthroposophical circles. On the one hand, this character represents the link between anthroposophy and anti-fascism (Cesarò also wrote about theosophy, a doctrine introduced to him by his mother, who organized meetings between intellectuals, theosophists, and occultists in her Roman living room), while on the other, he played a leading role in the political life of the 1920s: he was one of the founders of Social Democracy, and he participated in the Aventine secession. If it is true that – among other things – Violet went to live in the same street that the duke lived in with his mother (although there is no trace of this Roman residence in the expert report), then he perhaps played more than a secondary role in the planning of the shooting. These underground relationships were the subject of another suggestive historical mystery, *The Invisible Chain*, a book by Claudio Mauri on the so-called esoteric fascism⁸.

The narrative technique

A mystery novel always plays on suspense, on twists, in order to involve the reader/viewer. In this case, a *deductive* approach is used, based both on the reports of Commissioner Epifanio Pennetta, who conducted the investigations, and on the criminological report aimed at ascertaining the accused’s mental incapacity:

When she committed the fact of which she is accused, was Miss Gibson Violetta in normal conditions, so as to suggest that she had acted with the conscience or free will of her own actions? (7 Aprile 1926, p. 198)

De Sanctis and Giannelli emphasize the accused’s dissimulating, distrustful, and suspicious attitude, to the point of recognizing her tendency to isolation, and her invention

of different and artificial explanations for her actions. The emergence of the contradictions regarding the Duke di Cesarò is particularly intriguing: on the one hand, Violet Gibson declared that she “loved [him] very much”, while on the other, she did not hesitate to involve him in her criminal plan. And this aspect is linked to the element that is perhaps the highlight of the whole affair: the admission of an *unconfessable secret*, which in all probability had its roots in her relationship with the duke, and, in any case, appears to be an aspect of the delusional system the accused was a victim of.

Giannelli and De Sanctis' psychiatric expertise plays on the contrast between two *suggestions*: an external one, deriving from the social environment, “that is, from the readings, from the discourses, from the events”, the historical-political context, and, above all, from the relationship with the Duke di Cesarò; and an internal one, typical of Violet's delusional disorder. And if the latter gains the upper hand, the other will have less influence. Indeed, the paranoid personality was “unified and therefore tetragonal against the influences coming from external reality and from the ordinary procedures of conviction and persuasion” (*ibidem*, pp. 248 e 246). Finally, if it is true that every suggestive process ends up being “auto-suggestive” (as modern psychology maintains), this transition is more valid for a paranoid subject than for a non-paranoid one. This analysis as a whole gives rise to a question: in light of current knowledge of mental processes, can the expert conclusion that she suffered from *paranoia*, based on Kraepelin's clinical psychiatry, still be considered valid today? Or, given today's more nuanced understanding of the boundary between normality and abnormality, could we hypothesize that the internal and external causes merged into an inextricable whole in Violet's twisted mind?

The psychiatric examination of the accused Violetta Gibson

In an archival note, G.P. Lombardo states that Violet Albina Gibson's psychiatric report, compiled by Sante de Sanctis and Augusto Giannelli between 8 July and 3 August 1926, belongs to a very large collection of documents, some of which are in the Archive of the History of Psychology at the “La Sapienza” University (ASP), including twenty judicial expert reports (9 typewritten and 11 handwritten). Therefore, the expert report on Gibson, consisting of 59 pages, is presumably the original typed version of the document delivered to the Investigation Counsel at the court of Rome. The psychiatrists specify that they only had 22 days to study the procedural documents, carry out the clinical examinations of the accused, and prepare the report, with a short extension until 3 August to deliver it.

The report begins with the defendant's medical history, which shows that her noble Irish family had a history of disease, but not of crime. It continues to describe Gibson's life up to 1925, with a detailed analysis of the diseases she suffered from, and her wanderings in England and various Italian cities. The report reveals that she

had suffered severe nervous breakdowns and had attempted suicide. According to the testimony of the chief nurse at the asylum directed by Prof. Mendicini, Violet already appeared a little eccentric, she led a secluded life, and did not read newspapers, but only religious books. She answered the questions that were asked after the shooting with disconnected sentences, and then there was the mystery of the revolver, which Violet said had been delivered to her by a compatriot. During her detention in the Mantellate prison, Gibson maintained a “calm and indifferent” demeanor, with the exception of her striking another inmate on the head with a hammer.

On July 2nd, Gibson was transported from the Mantellate prison at the Provincial Psychiatric Hospital in Sant’ Onofrio to be subjected to investigation experts (ibidem, p. 204).

The experts subjected Violet to a “somatic clinical examination”, which revealed her frail constitution; observations on the organs were followed by data on heart rate, reflexes, tremors, etc., and more generally, on sensitivity (tactile, painful, etc.) and even her handwriting. The mental state examination consisted of 10 visits, based on behavioral analysis and interrogations, but no experiments in mental semeiotics were done, in order to avoid refusals and hostility from the accused. Violet was calm and resigned, a “woman of well-developed general intelligence”, an “astute woman of spirit [...] of an elevated psychological state”, and she admitted that she was crazy, although she stubbornly continued to protect her *secret*. Her discourse was “lucid, ordered, precise”, but it lacked any spontaneity. “Each of her discourses contained a program; every answer from her was thought out, indeed meditated; in short, her behavior was consciously organized towards defense”⁹.

The subject was “a closed character, taciturn, mistrusting, meek but suspicious and touchy, jealous of her liberty and independence, intolerant of any control, a lover of isolation and having a propensity to disregard the counsel of others, including friends”. She harbored a persecution complex, consistently blaming her family for being the cause of her illness and of wanting to deprive her of her freedom. There were also symptoms of megalomania: she talked repeatedly of having to carry out “great things”¹⁰.

Ultimately, Gibson never expressed “neither regret, nor remorse” for her insane act. Nevertheless, the two psychiatrists found no signs of psychic dissociation, hallucinations, or delirious ideas. On the contrary, the fundamental characteristic of her mental structure and behavior was “without a doubt, dissimulation”, with different and artificial explanations for all her actions¹¹.

The medical-psychological study on Gibson led to a paragraph entitled: “VIOLETTA GIBSON IS NOT A CRIMINAL”: despite her aggressive attitude on several occasions, and having never shown any regret towards her victims, she is said to be “mild-tempered”, and “in the face of psychopathology she is nothing but an alienated-criminal... afflicted with paranoia”¹². In this regard, Giannelli and De Sanctis explicitly

quoted the definition given by the German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin, according to which paranoia is characterized by “the furtive development, resulting from inner causes, of a lasting, immovable delusional system that is accompanied by the complete retention of clearness and order in thinking, willing and acting”¹³.

The fact that Violet did not show any emotion or regret for the victims was interpreted as an “emotional shift”, proven by the reddening of her face and psycho-cardiac reflexes, “a symptom of a deeper transformation of the psychic person, that is, a symptom of a pathological state of consciousness and of certain cortical and mesencephalic segments of the brain respectively”¹⁴. Although they considered it important to highlight the “psychological determinism” that was at the root of the insane gesture, the two psychiatrists did not consider it appropriate to “go along the path of the unconscious” or the “doctrine of libido” brilliantly formulated by Freud. However, as there were various signs and symptoms of “metaphysical-mystical-political” delusion, in the absence of any “discernible link” between the cause and the effect, they refer to the opinion of the English alienist Henry Maudsley, according to which

*it is impossible for a sane mind to foresee ... what mad thought it may conceive and bring forth in action ... To require a discernible link of cause and effect between the delusion and deed ... that is neither more nor less than to make the sane thought the measure of insane thought and to postulate the necessity or sane logical order in the disorder of madness*¹⁵.

To formulate their final evaluation, Giannelli and De Sanctis quoted a treatise on forensic medicine by one of their professors, Attilio Cevidalli of the University of Parma¹⁶, a text that is compared here with the seminal *Textbook* of the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler:

one could believe that the paranoid, who is oriented, logical, who is not prey to obsessions, if he kills the one by whom he believes himself persecuted, he is ultimately in the condition of a normal person who kills the one who really persecutes him (Cevidalli, p. 551).

The essence of paranoia is the delusional system, i.e., a structure of delusions that all have certain logical connections and contain no inner contradictions, even though the logic is not in all cases compelling (Bleuler, p. 518)

The final judgment therefore recognized that the accused was not in “normal conditions”, and even though she was “aware” of the act she was carrying out, she was not acting with “free will”. Having established that she could not be held responsible for her actions, she was declared to be suffering from (chronic) paranoia, and a danger to herself and others. It should be emphasized that the considerations in the margin of this psychiatric report reveal that the two phrenologists, with their diagnostic-differential analysis approach, aimed to ascertain the defendant’s mental capacity. They demonstrate that they were following the procedure of the Zanardelli Code, which was based on the fundamental principle of a preliminary assessment of the offender’s alleged “imputability”. Shortly thereafter, with the introduction of the Rocco Code and, above all, of the “very fascist

laws”, the military magistrates of the Special Tribunal would no longer show the same open-mindedness towards positivist criminology.

The era of fruitful collaborations between criminology and the judiciary thereby ended in Italy in the 1930s.

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