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Lombrosian Creatures: Literary Devices for an Effective Popularisation of Science

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ABSTRACT

Lombrosian Creatures: Literary Devices for an Effective Popularisation of Science

Whenever Cesare Lombroso needed to develop a new theory, he sought evidence in the criminal history of an individual, to persuade his readers – and perhaps himself as well – of the truth of his argument. He sourced these stories from old books and newspapers or selected criminal investigations in which he took part as a consultant. Thus, Cesare Lombroso popularised stories of ordinary criminals, such as Giuseppe Villella, the study of whose skull would convince him to have found the true nature of crime; or Vincenzo Verzeni, a strangler of women who loved to drink the fresh blood of his victims; and Giovanni Cavaglià, known as “Fusil”, a murderer who drew childish figures on a jug to tell his story before committing suicide. Cesare Lombroso used these cases both to validate his hypothesis and captivate the attention and interest of the audience. Unlike some of his colleagues, he did not shun the “volgarizzamento scientifico”, i.e. the popularisation of science. Conversely, Lombroso cleverly used this channel of scientific communication to spearhead his own ideas: sometimes he exaggerated certain aspects of his stories, while other times he added new narratives and meanings. This paper aims to highlight Cesare Lombroso’s narrative skills in the communication of science and to show how they were instrumental in promoting and disseminating his ideas and theories.

Keywords: Cesare Lombroso - Scientific Communication - Atavism

Foreword

In 1866, the Rector of the University of Pavia invited Cesare Lombroso, in his early thirties, to give some “popular science lectures for ladies” – as he himself would have renamed them – on anthropology and evolution. A few years later, these themes would become highly topical, in Italy as in the rest of the world, especially following the publication of Darwin’s *Descent of Man*, in 1871¹. As the anthropologist Maria Teresa Milicia recalled, “These lectures were very much in fashion. Men of science were called upon to disseminate the sensational discoveries and the extraordinary advancement of positive knowledge”²; however, it should be pointed out that these men of science did not always respond to such a call. Quite the contrary! As the alienist Enrico Morselli remarked: “Almost all scientists confined themselves to their laboratories and, with Olympian disdain, looked down on any attempt to enlighten the general public on scientific mysteries, as if science should be limited to sterile research and solitary lucubration”³. Lombroso, who in many respects was a unique scientist, was to show a tendency for popularisation throughout his life. In the words of Alfredo Verde and Monia Pastorelli, “it is indeed possible to state that capturing the reader’s interest was one of the aims directly pursued by Lombroso”⁴. What’s more: he, a sort of “dark storyteller”, proved to be “a master of communication, a pioneer of marketing, capable of intuiting and flattering the tastes of the audience”⁵. Or rather, of audiences. On the one hand, in fact, by insisting on the visual rendition of the criminal’s body, accurately measured and examined, he hoped to please those cultured people that late-19th-century positivism had educated to the quantitative rigour typical of the natural sciences. On the other hand, the Gothic-flavoured narratives of Criminal Anthropology, as well as the overuse of myths cemented in the collective imaginary and captivating narrative elements⁶, allowed him to reach a wider, semi-literate audience⁷ or, more precisely, “a public which emerged for the first time in Italy after unification, stimulated by the mass literacy campaign of the enlightened bourgeoisie, by universal suffrage, and by the dissemination of journals and ‘personal book collections’”⁸. The theories developed by Lombroso, said Aldo Francia, “appealed to the public at large, as he made statements in line with the *Zeitgeist*”⁹. This also explains the huge success of his works, which became international bestsellers from Moscow and Saint Petersburg to Buenos Aires; from Leipzig to London; and even New York and Shanghai¹⁰.

Meanwhile, in 1871 he published *L’uomo bianco e l’uomo di colore* (The White Man and the Man of Colour), a summary of the anthropological ideas expounded in his previous lectures, here considerably revised and adjusted. It was based on three core assumptions: a) an evolutionary principle; b) the idea of the relativity of crime; c) the identification of criminality as an atavistic phenomenon¹¹. Notably, in the same years Lombroso studied Vilella’s skull and had the intuition that there was a link “between primitive man and the whole series of living beings, from which our vanity would keep us a thousand miles away”¹².

A few years later, with the publication of *L'uomo delinquente* (The Criminal Man), his ideas on atavism would become internationally known. This success was largely due to his unquestionable narrative skills and his careful and shrewd choice of sensational case studies to present to readers as the tangible proof of his theoretical hypotheses. Amongst these, the best known are undoubtedly those of Giuseppe Villella, Vincenzo Verzeni, and Giovanni Cavaglia (better known as “Fusil”) who, at different times, were used to validate his hypotheses on the atavistic, savage nature of the criminal. The following pages will analyse Lombroso’s approach in the study of these three cases, which, as we shall see, will be recounted, not without some literary licence, and presented in a specific way to appeal to the public, especially the layman.

Villella’s Skull

On a sad day in December 1870, Lombroso is said to have identified, in the skull of the “brigand” Giuseppe Villella, a long series of atavistic anomalies including an enormous occipital dimple: a smooth-bottomed concavity that suggested to him the existence of a very ancient nervous structure on the phylogenetic scale – the cerebellum vermis – traceable in fish, birds, and lemurs¹³. At the sight of that anomaly, Lombroso said he was “enlightened” about the problem of the nature of the criminal: in his opinion, the anomaly found in that skull represented the link between criminals and certain lower animals.

With Villella’s dimple, the intuition on which Lombroso was to base his Criminal Anthropology¹⁴ took definitive shape: the criminal would be nothing more than an abnormal, “a primitive individual, a sort of hypo-evolved savage in whom instincts and aggressive drives were manifested in crime”¹⁵. This “atavism” – although Lombroso did not use this term in his first writings on Villella, preferring to use the term ‘arrested development’¹⁶– was the linchpin of Lombroso’s first solution to the problem of the origin of criminality.

The discovery of that anomaly in Villella’s skull, “which so admirably completed the analogies observed between criminals and savages, made an enormous impression on Lombroso”¹⁷. It was a kind of “epiphany”. Or, at least, that is how it is presented to us. It is, however, a true “founding myth” of criminal anthropology; a myth that Lombroso elaborated and perfected over time. To realise the mythical character of that reconstruction as well as, more generally, the “narrative effervescence” of the Verona-born scholar¹⁸, one needs only to compare the different versions of the story that Lombroso put forward over the years. One of the most emblematic examples of these reworkings, pursuant to the creation and consolidation of the founding myth, is certainly that of the autopsy on Villella’s body, that was never performed by him as he was only able to examine the skull, and not the entire corpse¹⁹. The examination of the skull itself was to have taken place years after Villella’s death, although this detail was deliberately omitted by the craniologist so as not to raise questions among his colleagues.

Nonetheless, doubts arose as to whether Lombroso had ‘fabricated’ his Vilella story to prove his hypothesis²⁰. The very identification of the occipital dimple, which represents the cornerstone of Lombroso’s Anthropology, was at least belated as it had already been known and described for some time. His real discovery, or “invention”, to use Renzo Villa’s expression, is rather “its connection with primitive criminal behaviour – an invention apparently based on scientific evidence, and therefore attested. But if anyone had wanted to link this skull anomaly to criminal behaviour, they would soon have been faced with fanciful descriptions”²¹.

What is certain is that the story of the “discovery” of that cranial anomaly enabled Lombroso to turn Vilella “from a simple criminal into a monster, the danger of which nearly overshadowed the importance of the discovery itself”²². This story, built up over the years, was to become the driving force for his theory of the criminal man, especially among amateurs. In short, Vilella’s anomalous skull, that “fetish”²³ displayed in plain sight on his desk²⁴, became the cornerstone on which Lombroso constructed his grand edifice.

The Verzeni Bite

Nevertheless, “As the years went by, Vilella and his occipital dimple became outdated. The collection of the by then famous criminal anthropologist had been enriched with thousands of pages full of stories that rummaged among the monstrous intimacy of human behaviour. It was a literature of criminal deviance whose plot was written in the bloody wake of the most heinous episodes of the age”²⁵. A case in point was an incident involving Vincenzo Verzeni, a young farmer from Bottanuco, a village near Bergamo, nowadays profiled in numerous essays on crime as the “first Italian serial killer”²⁶.

In 1873, a trial in which Lombroso took part as a forensic witness appointed by the defence, found Verzeni guilty for the brutal murder of two women, Giovanna Motta and Elisabetta Pagnoncelli, and for the attempted strangulation of his young cousin Marianna Verzeni. During the trial, Lombroso diligently analysed the defendant’s body in search of some sign of abnormality and diversity that externally reflected his inner monstrous nature²⁷. However, having found only three cranial anomalies in him, which, by his own admission, were of little relevance, he was forced to admit that he was a boy with a ‘normal’ physiognomy who looked like a “healthy” Bergamasque man. After investigating possible hereditary and socio-cultural influences, he finally attributed, at least in part, his criminal behaviour to a “kind of bloodthirsty fury that is associated with lechery”²⁸. The association between lust for blood and libido would show clear similarities with that of animals in heat and primitive man. In short, here we are faced with an embryonic but already clear elaboration of his later atavism²⁹.

For these reasons, convinced that he was not always of sound mind, Lombroso favoured “reduced liability” of the defendant, although Verzeni was still sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour.

Following the trial, however, Verzeni decided to meet Lombroso, releasing what the newspapers referred to as “Verzeni’s confession”. On that occasion, he reportedly admitted: “I have [...] actually killed those women and tried to strangle the others – because I felt an immense pleasure in that act as soon as I put my hands on their necks I... got... an... and felt a great pleasure (a real venereal pleasure); as for the first one (Verzeni’s little cousin), I did not strangle her completely because I was felt pleasure as soon as I touched her neck; for the same reason the five others who were attacked remained safe; instead the two M.[otta] and P.[agnoncelli] were suffocated because the pleasure was delayed, and I squeezed them more and more and they died. [...] Motta [...], after choking, I bit her (*piar*) – and I sucked her blood, which was salty, and which I enjoyed very much – I removed Motta’s calf after sucking it so that I could continue to enjoy it at home and roast it”³⁰.

These last macabre details prompted Lombroso to speak of an “anthropophagic atavism of Verzeni, who reverted to the primitive world”³¹. Verzeni, in a nutshell, was alleged to be “a savage with a lust for blood, who was a cannibal and therefore a criminal by atavism”³²; something of a vampire³³, a violent savage, or even a necrophiliac. For some, however, the image of Verzeni that emerges from these pages is nothing more than just another *invention*, a fiction born out of Lombroso’s narrative exuberance³⁴. What is certain is that this sort of confession helped Lombroso, who could now show his ever-growing gruesome public evidence of the reliability of his theories by exhibiting Verzeni as a case study. In the words of his daughter Gina, who wrote her father’s biography: “This example of the close relationship between crime and atavism, of which Lombroso could not find a better one, together with that of the median occipital dimple, thus proved to Lombroso that the criminal was an atavistic madman driven by the instincts of our ancestors that go back to the carnivores”³⁵. Once again, it all made sense.

Fusil’s Jug

While it is undeniable, as Stefano D’Auria wrote with regard to Lombroso, that “those who most impressed him and were decisive in the formulation of his theories were Vincenzo Verzeni and the brigand Villella”³⁶, an equally important role in the author’s personal collection of oddities and curiosities was played by another criminal: 24-year-old Giovanni Cavaglià, nicknamed “Fusil”. On the evening of 18 February 1878, after eating his entire ration and saying good night first to the warden and then to his inmate, he committed suicide by hanging himself with a rope tied with a napkin to the grating of his cell window. In August of the previous year, he had smashed the skull of Francesco Gambro, his boss, when he was a guest at his house, in his very bed. The next day, Cavaglià, instead of fleeing, had gone to work as usual, misleading those who questioned him about his boss and the pungent smell that had already reached the warehouse where he worked. He had then returned to the room where his

victim was lying on the bed and, to gain time, had locked his corpse, naked and with his knees tightly bound with a towel, in the cloakroom. He had then managed to obtain a foreign travel permit from the authorities and, after changing his name, had fled first to France and then to Switzerland. Five days after the crime, suspicious of the terrible stench coming from Gambro's bedroom, the police discovered the rotting corpse in the closet. Suspicion had immediately fallen on Cavaglià, who was tracked down a few days later in Switzerland, captured, remanded in custody, and finally brought to the Turin prison³⁷. There, he immediately confessed to the crime, but denied the aggravating circumstances. After one hundred days of imprisonment, he took his life. In fact, "with the same indifference with which he killed Gambro, he had decided to kill himself, setting the exact day and time"³⁸. When he died, a decorated jug was found in his cell. As Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg reminds us: "Writing was forbidden in Italian prisons. [...] any form of writing was strictly banned. But the prisoners wrote anyway; they left traces of their identity, of their names. They wrote on the walls, in the margins of books in the prison library, on the terracotta jugs used for drinking; they also wrote on their own bodies, that is, they tattooed themselves"³⁹. On that jug, Cavaglià had engraved "the story of the last period of his life, and something like a confession of his last crime and suicide, partly – as Lombroso explained – in words, partly in drawings, as was the custom of savage peoples, when grammar and language were so poor that they were unable to clearly express a complicated concept"⁴⁰. One side of the jug bore the following inscription: "giorni 100 [trascorsi in] cella per" meaning "days 100 [spent in] cell for" and, next to it, the drawing of Gambro's corpse in the closet. Next to the drawing, the inscription "giovane biellese Gambro LADER", meaning "young Biella-born man Gambro THIEF". On the other side of the jug, next to his nickname, "Fucile", was a drawing of his suicide with the inscription "ULTIMI ECES", meaning "final excesses", and next to it the word "PACE" (peace), probably the one he hoped to achieve after his last act of desperation. It was another confession, then, this time mediated by ungrammatical words and primitive drawings. Once again, according to Lombroso, this was tangible proof of the atavistic origin of the crime.

However, as seen for Villella, in this case as well, he had no way of meeting and questioning Cavaglià, so he was forced to rely only on hearsay obtained from the investigating judge. It is therefore unsurprising that Villa, once again, sees in this "another example of Lombroso devising exemplary figures with no regard for authentic documentation"⁴¹. Lombroso insisted on the anthropological data, which was not very conclusive: there were no relevant anatomical singularities, despite what he would have his readers believe, only the signs of previous meningitis and a skull with some bones a little thinner than usual. He must therefore stress the hereditary factor⁴²: Cavaglià's father was an alcoholic and a spendthrift, who committed suicide by drowning, or so it was said; his mother, diagnosed with a goitre, after years of unhappy

marriage, in despair, had thrown herself into a well. Lombroso argued: “We know that in addition to the harmful influence that alcohol exerts directly on the nervous system, alcoholic fathers often give rise to microcephalic, insane, and delinquent children”⁴³. However, in Lombroso’s eyes, Cavaglia’s story “is very important in many ways”: not only because it shows the influence played by hereditary factors but also because it “brings the delinquent man closer to the madman in whom the said alterations are so frequently found”⁴⁴. The same coldness he displayed both in the murder of Gambro and in the planning of his own suicide, i.e. the insensitivity shown in equal measure towards himself and others, would make him “one of the most perfect types of the criminal man”⁴⁵. And that historiated jug would be the clearest proof of this.

When Size Matters

Before moving on to the conclusion, we shall make a brief digression, not to be taken lightly, but for the sake of completeness. Lombroso’s thesis, according to which born criminals can be identified by certain physical traits known as “stigmata”, visible body marks of atavism, is well known⁴⁶. It is hard to draw up a complete list, as Lombroso’s attention shifted over time to gradually different and bizarre details, even going so far as to consider tattoos as part of his evidentiary system. More generally, however, it was a matter of facial and body features that deviated from the norm in shape and size: hair and iris colour, eye shape, size of noses, ears, and jaws which, due to their abnormality, bore witness to the fact that the body belonged to an earlier stage of evolutionary development. Among these “revealing details” of criminal tendencies, we also find, unsurprisingly, the size and shape of the penis.

In fact, as Lombroso would note in the *Introduction* to the Italian version of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Sexual Psychopathy), in a study conducted with Ottolenghi⁴⁷ on a sample of fifty “rei di libidine” (sex offenders), 62% showed signs of genital abnormalities⁴⁸. After carefully noting the size of the member (52% appeared to have a medium-sized penis, 18% a small one, and 30% a “very voluminous” one), he compiled a list of the abnormalities found: from the presence of spots (found in 18% of cases) to a “flute-beak glans” (only a 2%) or a “conical glans” (2%); from a crooked penis (2%) to the incomplete descent of one of the two testicles (2%); from a “bipartite frenulum” (2%) to abnormal folds of the scrotum, also including hernias (10%), ulcers in the scrotum (2%), and other anomalies.

Even in his meticulous investigation of Verzeni’s body, Lombroso focussed on his virile member. Notably, he observed: “well-developed penis shaped like a flute beak; foreskin slightly reddened and free from frenulum, which proves the use and even abuse of the organ”⁴⁹. In the case of the Bottanuco murderer, the notes regarding his genital apparatus confirm the assumption that he was a masturbator. On the contrary, the attention paid to the penis of Cavaglia, whose crime was not of a sexual nature, looked different. Here is a description of it: “The penis, of average size, was flaccid,

but bent over the abdomen, with the urethra moistened by an apparently spermatic liquid. Furthermore, the section of the sheath that corresponded to the glans presented a dense, greyish-yellowish stain, which was found under the microscope to be sperm”⁵⁰. The account, reported as hearsay by Lombroso, seems to allude to an ejaculation that supposedly occurred as a result of the strangulation process. Needless to say, we have no data on Vilella’s reproductive system.

While Lombroso’s interest in the shape and size of the virile member of Verzeni, Cavaglià, and others was, however, strictly limited to his anthropological-criminal investigations, this may not have been the case for certain readers of his best-known works. There is, in fact, a socio-cultural element that deserves to be examined⁵¹. That of the post-unification years was “a very sexualised world, [imbued with] a nervous and excitable sensitivity, unbridled sentimentalism, an excitement of the senses that pervaded ladies and gentlemen, proletarians and bourgeoisies alike. One had the impression that the new nation had grown up on a volcano of sentimental and erotic energy of conflict, of aggression only momentarily restrained”⁵².

To meet this need – which, if not exactly new, then revealed at least in a different guise – a large number of pamphlets, booklets, and photographs replete with more or less veiled eroticism were printed⁵³. But these articles were not very appropriate for respected and respectable men and women whose prudery led them in some cases to find valid substitutes in scientific writings which, although in totally different ways and with totally different aims, nevertheless dealt with the subject of sexuality. And here, on several occasions, certain medical literature was accused of taking advantage of this need by passing off pornographic content as scientific⁵⁴. There was a very fine line, indeed almost non-existent. As noted by historian Peter Gay, in the eyes of the intransigent Victorian censors, “a sober manual on contraception by Robert Dale Owen, and a pornographic story by Anonymous were all the same, all certain to corrupt and deprave the innocent”⁵⁵.

“When Criminal Anthropology studies the manifestations of ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ sexuality, thus spawning unconfessed curiosity”, Luca Clerici points out, “it runs the risk of crossing the same thin and highly controversial line between licit and illicit”⁵⁶. One cannot help but wonder, at this point, whether Lombroso’s writings – which, by indulging in gruesome details of crimes and murders had undoubtedly attracted some interested readers – had not succeeded in intriguing others by delving into details capable of titillating their prurient fantasies.

Conclusions

Vilella, Verzeni, and Cavaglià: at issue are three criminals who gained notoriety through Lombroso’s pen; three different cases, but each one presented as exemplary and paradigmatic, as much or even more than the previous one. As noted frequently, the means used by the Veronese doctor to validate his hypotheses were slightly far-

fetches. Alfredo Verde summarises the question as follows: Lombroso “applies a pre-established narrative schematism to the case, forcing the subject to enter the available literary “genre”, as if to say: ‘this is how it works here, there is no room for you to talk about yourself, for you to make people understand what happened; stick to the rules, toe the line, or perhaps repent, so we can help you’”⁵⁷.

Thus, Villella’s anomalous skull, Verzeni’s almost vampire-like bite, and Cavaglià’s historiated jug all served the purpose of promoting and disseminating Lombroso’s theories. Despite “their ‘inherent’ scientific value, which is clearly negligible”⁵⁸, these theories and ideas gained wide popularity mainly thanks to his captivating literary style⁵⁹. Such a style, although “the subject of criticism inclined to belittle the scientist, who would rather be the populariser of a pseudoscience”⁶⁰, remaining far removed from the rigorous lexicon of Neuropathology or Psychopathology, “is never abstruse or affected. Polemical, lively, simplifying, Lombroso seemed to address every reader, especially the layman”⁶¹.

A simple literary style, therefore, understandable even to the general public, which was “more journalistic than scientific [...] not infrequently bypasses the scientific method and language, makes use of proverbs, popular opinions, myths widespread in the collective imaginary, and even somewhat legendary elements”⁶². This is a style which, by questioning “the true nature of humanity, its essence, and its limits”⁶³, ends up taking on certain traits typical of Gothic novels. It draws on the macabre, it indulges in the truculent, appealing to a public that on several occasions showed its hunger for disturbing and, not infrequently, gruesome details: the monstrosity of Villella’s exploits; the stench allowing the police to discover Gambro’s body, naked and scrunched up inside the closet, and already in an obvious state of decomposition, so much so that from that piece of furniture, as the local newspapers of the time recounted, “a certain yellowish substance, that is repulsive to describe, oozed out of it”⁶⁴; the disconcerting discovery of hair pins stuck, as in a chilling ritual, into the bodies of Verzeni’s victims; Giovanna Motta’s mangled body, “split” with a razor, showing bitemarks on her thighs, left by Verzeni to suck her blood; the flesh of her calf removed to be devoured⁶⁵. And so on and so forth. In other ways, his style is reminiscent of “the popular language of feuilletons” with its narrative structures full of contrasts and exaggerations, “highly repetitive, with stereotypical characters; strong colours and violent chiaroscuro”⁶⁶. In any case, this approach appealed to the public at large and was effective due to “its narrative flow, its multi-material collages (a mixture of reported events, quotations, psychiatric records, percentages, old memories repeated with variations, and recent experiences), and always excessive, monstrous figures”⁶⁷, like those, briefly examined here, of his three champions of atavism: Villella, Verzeni, and Cavaglià. “Decisive figures”, remarks Renzo Villa, “but hardly authentic, the results of a writing process, the outcomes of literary trends, as well as a decisive rhetorical creativity”⁶⁸. Undoubtedly, however, this style served a purpose, that is, first and foremost, popularising the subject matter.

In this regard, Ferruccio Giacanelli observes that: “Lombroso was a staunch advocate of popularisation and practiced his conviction of educating the masses, whether by printing pamphlets on pellagra for the peasants at his own expense, when he decided to take this problem, which had been brutally rejected by the academic and governmental authorities, ‘to the grassroots’ [...], or whether by devoting himself to an intense journalistic activity, dealing with themes that sometimes could be labelled as a collection of oddities, they still denote a connection with everyday life, with ‘popular’ interests”⁶⁹. The scientific education of the masses was of the utmost importance to him, as it represented at once a social and cultural issue: “All of this was done in order to shake and imbue with new political life the inert brain of the people, who are all concerned with church ceremonies or trivial complaints”⁷⁰.

One may therefore wonder if it was precisely this popularising intention that justified – if not in full, at least in part – some of his undeniable literary licences. In light of the above, however, such a style would serve the goal of achieving a very specific objective. In conclusion, what emerges from this fleeting overview is not so much the image of Lombroso as a “storyteller who wrote novels in the guise of scientific reports”⁷¹, as that of a talented populariser whose “loosely-knit writings”⁷², capable of intercepting the often macabre and sometimes even lustful tastes of new readers, prove to be the result of a highly effective communication strategy. It was able to bring the wider audience of the *fin de siècle* closer to science, making his theories intriguing and turning his works into genuine best sellers.

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