

Tales of Trauma, Identity, and God: The Memoirs of Mafia Boss Michele Greco and Leonardo Vitale

Original Article

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Rossella Merlino*

Abstract: In the last decade, the uncovering of a “mafia system of communication” based on written messages (*pizzini*) and other forms of writing has significantly challenged the long-held view that the Sicilian mafia was a criminal organisation largely based on an oral tradition. In particular, the discovery and emergence of memoirs and letters written by former *mafiosi* (who held different roles of responsibility within the organisation) raises new questions about the role of writing in the process of disengagement from mafia organisations. This article analyses the memoirs of mafia boss Michele Greco and mafia member Leonardo Vitale to investigate the dynamics at play when dealing with the trauma of leaving *Cosa Nostra* and the resulting loss of a powerful collective identity. While the acquisition of a mafia identity has been the object of numerous studies, less attention has been given to what losing mafia status entails and the specific role of writing in this process. The article draws upon theories of representation of identity in self-narratives as a basis for our interpretation. The data analysed is from judicial papers, police reports and the relevant secondary literature on the subject. A previously unknown memoir written by boss Michele Greco in 1994 is also presented in this study for the first time.

Keywords: Sicilian mafia – Michele Greco – Leonardo Vitale – memoirs – identity – trauma

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Introduction

Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out

(Acts 3:19)

Until recently, it was a widely held belief that the Sicilian mafia, *Cosa Nostra*, was a secret society that relied solely on an oral communication system^[1]. The discovery of the *pizzini* (messages) archive in Bernardo Provenzano's hideout in April 2006 significantly changed this view, demonstrating the existence of an efficient and compartmentalised system of written communication based on small type written notes and relying on a distribution network of carefully selected messengers. It is important to note that written communication had already been used in the course of mafia history in the form of short letters and notes,^[2] although these were only sporadically employed and generally had to be destroyed after reading (Dino, 2002: 149). In 2007, a series of notes containing the mafia Decalogue of rules, and the oath of the initiation ceremony emerged among the documents seized by police during the arrest of Palermo mafia boss Salvatore Lo Piccolo^[3]. On the same occasion, detectives discovered two letters written by mafia boss Matteo Messina Denaro and addressed to Lo Piccolo, adding to the twelve previous missives already written by him and seized by police at different moments^[4]. Additionally, the number of autobiographical texts that have emerged in recent years, and specifically the memoirs written by former mafia affiliates like the ones that are presented in this article, contribute to a more comprehensive perspective not only on the role of writing in mafia communication, but also on the value of self-narrative analysis in mafia studies. In particular, memoirs can provide a natural context in which to explore the individual dynamics at play dealing with the exit from the mafia group and its totalising collective dimension. While considerable academic attention has been dedicated to the acquisition and construction of mafia identity through communicative practices (see Principato and Dino, 1997; Paoli, 2003; Dino, 2008; Di Piazza, 2010; Merlino, 2012,2013), fewer attempts have been made to understand what losing mafia status entails, and the role of language in this process. Yet, a prominent feature of mafia defectors' accounts is an expression of the "trauma" that *mafiosi* experience in leaving the organisation; a trauma that appears to be particularly related to the loss of identity with which they became imbued at the point of initiation (Lo Verso and Lo Coco 2005: 46, 91).

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach in the study of identity formation in self-narratives, this article focuses on the process of identity reconstruction following the trauma of leaving *Cosa Nostra* as it emerges from the memoirs of former mafia members Leonardo Vitale and mafia boss Michele Greco. Self-narratives, the conceptual category delineated by psychologist Kenneth J Gerger (1991), chiefly refers to a narrative in which a person recounts his or her own past life. However, as Gerger maintains, in the process of writing a self-narrative past experiences are not simply recalled and described, but they undergo a process of systematic reinterpretation and re-

writing through which the self is crucially re-defined (Gergen, 1991; Gergen and Gergen, 1988). Narrative documentation for Leonardo Vitale consists of a handwritten memoir that he handed over to police in 1973. Narrative material relating to Michele Greco consists of two memoirs that he wrote from his prison cell in 1987 and 1994, the latter of which is presented here for the first time. Although the focus of this article is on their memoirs, in both Vitale and Greco's case, other self-narratives derived from judicial documents—letters, police interrogation and court hearing—will be integrated into our analysis to provide a more comprehensive overview and to allow for data triangulation. A presentation of the influential position that the Greco family held in Palermo and the wider province, as well as its role in the events leading to the Second Mafia War (1981–1983), is helpful to contextualise Michele Greco's persona at the top level of the Sicilian mafia during the violent turmoil of the early 1980s. Similarly, the contextualisation of Vitale's memoir and letters within his social and criminal *milieu* serves to illustrate a different approach in dealing with dissociation from the mafia.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the reliability of this type of data. Here it suffices to say that, rather than the authenticity of the events described and claims reported, this study is interested in what the accounts tell us about the narrators: how *mafiosi* represent themselves; the extent to which disengagement from the mafia is addressed, to whom the memoirs are addressed and why these recipients were chosen. This entails a focus on the way individual perspectives might be influenced by collective narratives, and how cultural codes may influence these narratives.

The theoretical framework adopted here is based on social constructionist perspectives of identity formation in personal narratives. At the core of this paradigm is the assumption that language and specifically self-narratives play a central role in the process of identity formation. This approach fits within the recent “turn to narratives” in numerous academic disciplines, where personal narratives are adopted to examine “individual and collective action and meanings, as well as the social processes by which social life and human relationships are made and changed” (Laslett, 1999: 392). In particular, narrative psychological theories offer a useful analytical model to examine how narratives can be used to rebuild the individual's sense of identity and meaning following a personal trauma. Narrative psychology emphasises the centrality of linguistic and socio-cultural representations in the process of selfconstruction (Freeman, 1993; Crossley, 2000). Memoirs like those taken into account in this study therefore provide a natural context in which to explore not only how identity can be constructed through writing, but also the role that shared cultural values and social conventions play in the dynamics of identity (re)-construction following a crisis or a trauma.

The “Joe Valachi” of Altarello di Baida: Leonardo Vitale

In the early 1980s, amid the unprecedented escalation of violence of the Second Mafia War

between the Corleonese faction and the historical mafia clans of Palermo, prosecutors began to investigate possible connections between mafia groups across Sicily. A year later, prominent *mafioso* Tommaso Buscetta turned state's evidence. Prior to his confessions, judicial authorities had only a superficial knowledge of the mafia phenomenon. Buscetta, who had lost many of his close relatives in the on-going mafia war, provided them with extremely valuable insights into the mafia. He described the structure of a unique criminal organisation, with initiation rituals, rules and statutes, born in Western Sicily and known to its members as *Cosa Nostra*^[1]. This description of the structure and workings of *Cosa Nostra* became known as the "*Buscetta Theorem*" and provided the grounds, in 1986, for the biggest criminal trial in Sicilian history with approximately five hundred *mafiosi* being prosecuted⁶. The 1987 historical sentence of the Court of Assise and the 1992 verdict from Italy's Court of Cassation confirmed the validity of this theorem. As a result of this verdict, not only were notable *mafiosi* sentenced to life imprisonment, but it became a matter of record that the mafia was a single organisation of *men of honour*^[2] bound to one another by an oath of loyalty. The documentary evidence that prosecutors Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino presented in early 1985 supporting the "*Buscetta Theorem*" began with the story of Leonardo Vitale, the mafia affiliate who had broken the oath of silence ten years before Buscetta appeared on the scene⁸. Leonardo Vitale is considered one of the few *pentiti* to have "repented" in the true sense of the term⁹. In August 1972, he was arrested and accused of having participated in the kidnapping of Luciano Cassina, son of a notable entrepreneur, but was released one month later on the grounds of insufficient evidence. On March 29, 1973, he decided of his own accord to inform the police of his role within *Cosa Nostra* and reveal the structure and workings of the organisation¹⁰. Vitale requested to speak to chief police Bruno Contrada, to whom he confessed numerous acts of arson, extortion, and two murders. Later labelled in the media as the "Joe Valachi of Altarello"¹¹ for the gravity of his revelations, Leonardo Vitale described the hierarchy of the organisation, the existence of a Commission—the highest ruling body within *Cosa Nostra*—and the structure of a *cosca* (mafia clan). The role of top echelon *mafiosi* such as Salvatore Riina and Giuseppe "Pippo" Calò, and their political relations with the then mayor of Palermo, Vito Ciancimino, were exposed.

A member of the *Altarello di Baida* mafia faction in Palermo, Vitale belonged to a well-respected family in the sense of both the mafia and blood relations. He was descendant of the Vitale cousins who, as early as 1892, were suspects in several murders (Lupo, 2009: 208). More than seventy years later, the Altarello faction was under the command of Giovanbattista "Titta" Vitale, Leonardo's uncle. As Leonardo Vitale would later explain in detail in his memoir, after his father's death, he found a substitute father figure in his uncle Titta, who had already begun introducing him to the world of *Cosa Nostra*. For example, he described how, at the behest of his uncle, he had to shoot a horse and subsequently kill a rival *mafioso* as a test to demonstrate his skills under close observation¹². Having successfully passed his test, he underwent initiation. Vitale confessed that he was tricked into joining the mafia by claims that the society was born to fight thieves and help the weak, in the tradition of *I Beati Paoli*¹³. On the occasion of his initiation, representatives of the *Altarello di Baida* faction told him that *Cosa Nostra* derived from the *Beati Paoli* and its aim remained to defend the weak and fight injustices:

They pricked my middle finger with a bitter orange thorn and set fire to a sacred holy picture asking me to repeat the sacred oath of the *Beati Paoli*. After that, I kissed all the men of honour attending the ceremony on the lips, without the tongue however, and I officially entered into the Altarello Family¹⁴.

Confirming the version of the ritual given by other men of honour throughout the history of the organisation, Vitale also stressed the profound impact that the ceremony had on him. As numerous studies have observed, the initiation ritual of *Cosa Nostra* creates a schism between the individual and his previous allegiances, while simultaneously forging a new, inseparable bond with the mafia community (Paoli, 2003; Dino, 2008; Merlino, 2012). The candidate for affiliation swears absolute loyalty to his fellow members and acceptance of the boss's authority over him. Moreover, by referring to mythical traditions and manipulating crucial symbols that are shared with wider society, mafia leaders legitimise their authority and the existence of the organisation in the eyes of new affiliates. This helps to understand the consideration and esteem Leonardo had for his uncle Titta. As he explained to the police:

I killed to demonstrate to my uncle that I was somebody. I found in my uncle the father I never had. I admired him, I tried to imitate him. I never felt a criminal when I was with him. I was happy to be with him all the time, I followed him everywhere (Lo Verso, 1998: 139).

A section of the handwritten memoir that Vitale handed to the police in 1973 clearly shows his attempt to justify his decision to turn himself in, distance himself from his mafia allegiance whilst acknowledging the social status and privileges that a *mafioso* enjoys in the eyes of external society:

My only guilt is to be born into a family of mafia traditions and to have lived in a society where everyone is a *mafioso* and is thus highly respected, while those who are not are roundly despised. You need to be a *mafioso* to *be somebody*. This I was taught, and this I believed. The mafia itself is an evil that leaves no hope to the person who enters it. A *mafioso* has no choice, because no one is born *mafioso* but they will make you one if they wish. Mafia is criminality and *mafiosi* should not be respected nor revered¹⁵.

By comparison with his testimony given during interrogations, Vitale's memoir does not discuss mafia relations, workings, or specific crimes. What emerges, instead, is a more personal perspective that suggests that the recipients might not have been solely engaging with the police to whom it was handed or his close family, but also external society at large. Since self-narratives involve a communicative interaction between a narrator and his audience, it is only through a shared cultural understanding that both the narrator and the audience participate in the process of linking the events narrated within the overall narrative structure (Lawler, 2012: 16). It is precisely for this reason that personal narratives must refer to, and draw on, wider cultural narratives including cultural codes, myths, values that are immediately and officially recognised as culture-specific. Religious references, in particular, work in the narrative because they are understood culturally "as

signifying more than themselves” (ibid: 12).

In explaining why he had turned himself in, something that was unheard of for a *mafioso* at that point, Leonardo Vitale wrote that he had repented for his past as a mafia member because he was moved by a profound religious crisis and a renewed faith in God. As he wrote in his memoir:

The *Beati Paoli*, *Coriolano della Floresta*, Freemasonry, *Giovine Italia*, the Neapolitan *Camorra*, *Cosa Nostra* opened my eyes to a world made of killings and whatever is worst in the world because it lives far from God and from divine laws. *Mafiosi* are criminals of the worst kind; those who respect and protect them or, even worse, who exploit them, have forgotten God; one becomes a man of honour by observing the ten commandments of God, not by killing, stealing or intimidating^[1]. As this example shows, the reference to the *Beati Paoli*, *Giovine Italia* and *Coriolano della Floresta* represent clear examples of myths and narratives that are officially recognised as culture-specific, thus creating a clear code of identification between the audience, external society, and the narrator, Leonardo Vitale.

The substance and content of his revelations and the continuous, overzealous religious appeals led prosecutors to question Vitale’s mental state. This hypothesis was further validated by a series of specific incidences that included smearing himself in faeces, burning his clothes and self-harming behaviour. As Vitale explained to a team of forensic psychiatrists who were called to determine whether he was fit to give evidence, these acts helped him demonstrate how even extreme gestures could never be as harmful as his acts within the mafia had been (Lo Verso, 1998: 133-144). He confessed to being torn between good and evil. For example, in his memoir he lucidly addressed and compared a set of social, psychic and physical illnesses: he categorised the mafia, corrupted authorities and prostitution as examples of social diseases while illnesses such as syphilis and genital warts were physical diseases. The mental illness and religious crises that afflicted him were therefore the result of the aforementioned social and physical diseases:

Mental semi-infirmity = psychic disease. Mafia = social disease. Political mafia = social disease. Corrupt authorities = social disease. Prostitution = social disease, syphilis, warts, etc. = physical diseases that influences the ailing psyche right from childhood. Religious crises = psychic diseases that derives from these other diseases. These are the evils to which I have fallen victim. I, Leonardo Vitale, resurrected in the faith of the true God¹⁷.

The contrast between good and evil appears to reflect the same contrast in his family between the world of his mother and that of his father. On the one hand, his father and his uncle who represented a world of danger, violence, and secrecy; on the other, his mother and sister, who represented “the religious, maternal, soft world of symbiotic relations, opposite values to those of the mafia” (Lo Verso, 1998: 168). His mother, in particular, would play a fundamental role in his decision to turn himself in and in the subsequent period of reclusion.

The psychiatric evaluation pronounced Vitale “mentally semi-infirm” but it clearly stated that his

mental state did not impair his memory and thus the validity of his confessions. Confirming these results, the 1987 Sentence of the maxi-trial would later report:

His statements are, without doubt, the result of a spiritual crisis and may certainly indicate a form of mental illness. However, this does not imply the inability to recall or describe past events, such as the ones discussed in his memoir^[1].

Vitale's case came to trial in 1977 and his testimony led to a number of affiliates of the Altarello Family being indicted, including his uncle Titta Vitale. However, the psychiatric evaluation was not sufficient to defend the credibility of Vitale's defection at the appeal stage two years later. At the end of the trial in 1980, the Court of Appeal overturned the verdict and all those indicted were acquitted on the grounds of insufficient evidence. Leonardo Vitale, declared insane, was committed for another four years to several mental asylums including the institution of *Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto* where he would remain until June 1984. A letter written while held at this psychiatric institution clearly shows his feelings of betrayal towards "Italian society", to which the letter was addressed:

After all I have done, our beautiful society rewards me by keeping me in prison under strict surveillance like a criminal. Oh poor Jesus Christ!, how immense your love for humanity must have been, the same humankind that sentenced you to die on the cross, for the sake of us ungrateful men blinded by the evil you defeated with your resurrection. I am also resurrected in you my Lord and I also conquered evil like you because you made me understand where it resides. I conquered this evil because I have you in my mind and in my heart, Jesus, guide me to do the right thing always. Do not allow evil to persecute me again because this is what the Italian authorities and institutions are doing to me right now. Vitale Leonardo^[1].

On the morning of 2 December 1984, six months after his release, Vitale was murdered on his way home from Sunday mass at the Capuchin church that he visited every day with his mother and sister. The section dedicated to Leonardo Vitale in the 1982 *Sentenza Ordinanza* in the criminal proceeding against "Abbate + 706" concludes:

Unlike state justice, the mafia understood the importance of Vitale's confessions and, at the opportune moment, inexorably punished him for violating the law of *omertà*. May Vitale find the recognition he deserves at least after his death^[1].

Trauma, identity, and personal narratives

What emerges from Leonardo Vitale's memoir is the trauma experienced in taking the decision of leaving the organisation and a reified collective identity. The need to justify the decision to detach himself from his mafia allegiance, to be understood by his family and to redeem himself is evident also in the several letters that Vitale addressed to his mother and sister whilst being held in the mental institute of *Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto*:

My dearest Mother, dear Maria, I just wanted to let you know that I am fine and I pray to God that I might hear the same about you. Please, do not worry too much about me and let's pray to the Holy Virgin that we will soon see each other again. Mother, I heard they have arrested many people whom I indicated as mafia members, including uncle Titta. Mother, all this is happening because of me, and the thought of having thrown many families into despair is excruciating, but I hope you will understand me. I did it and there is no way back. Everyone who lives in the light will understand me. I intend to help the law and justice to exterminate this tumour that afflicts our society. At the same time, I also want to give these damned souls the possibility of entering the grace of God by repenting for their sins^[2].

In the social sciences, a trauma is understood as a life-changing event that may be experienced individually or collectively and that “overwhelms the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning” (Herman, 1992: 33; Caruth, 1996). In particular, trauma can be interpreted as a physical or emotional shock that causes significant long-term psychological effects to a person or a group, “marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander, 2004: 1). This theoretical framework departs from the classical psychoanalytic understanding of trauma as a reaction to events happening outside the range of ordinary human experience, and sees the impact of the event, rather than the event itself, as constituting the trauma (Glynn, 2006). The close link between trauma and identity is self-evident. As psychiatrist Judith Herman (2001: 51) argues:

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience.

In a criminal organisation like *Cosa Nostra*, the affiliate identifies with the codes and rules of the group to which he belongs. *Cosa Nostra* provides its members with a totalising vision of the world, a social *milieu* characterised by familiar cultural codes and protection. This explains why, in the majority of cases, the identity crisis in mafia defectors does not relate to the feelings of guilt for the crimes committed, nor for the years spent in prison. The central trauma appears to be largely related to the decision to turn state's evidence. This step implies a profound fracture within the social identity assigned at the point of initiation, consolidated and sustained through the relations with other mafia members, and through observance of the mafia codes and rules of conduct. In Vitale's case, this fracture appears to be additionally related to repentance for the crimes committed in the name of *Cosa Nostra*, the decision to break the oath of honour and betray the organisation, and to the need to appeal to other sets of values with which to redefine his social

identity. This is particularly evident in one of the letters that he addressed to his mother and sister:

Mother, Maria, do you understand what the mafia does? Do you have an idea of all the crimes that it commits in the name of vile money? Who are we, miserable men, to claim the right to kill our brothers and sisters, to take the role of God Almighty in dispensing death? Insane, we are insane! Oh! Why did I not see these things before? Why did I leave God, this God who is good and right and still willing to forgive us if we truly repent for our sins. Mother, the Holy Spirit is in me, and this is how I explain this radical change I have undergone . A new light entered into me and made me a better man, brought me back to God. Mother, Maria, it is so beautiful to live in the grace of God. I have never been so happy before, so confident. I have never felt this inner peace and I pray to God that he may make me worthy of Him more and more^[1].

The trauma for a *pentito* is further accentuated by the fact that, on leaving the organisation, a *mafioso* does not return to the status he had prior to initiation. Instead, he has to cope with a social identity that is now marked indelibly with the worst crime a *mafioso* could commit in mafia ideology: the defection^[1]. In mafia terms, he who betrays the organisation is a *sbirro* (“grass”, lit. cop), *cornuto* (cuckold), *infame* (villain, disgrace), a *nuddu miscatu cu nenti* (“nothing mixed with nothing”), all categories that carry a particular negative meaning both within the mafia and in popular culture. This assumption finds clear evidence in the insistence with which many former *mafiosi* have denied their status of “pentito” addressing their rivals instead with the appellative, as if they felt “the need to motivate their choice trying to establish themselves as avengers of a bygone legality” (Lo Verso, 1998: 102)^[2]. As Judge Giovanni Falcone noted, the main concern for these defectors was not the fear of being murdered but the fear of losing honour, a central component of mafia collective identity (Paoli, 2003: 72-75). In social psychology, the term “social identity” refers to that sense of *self* that people derive from feeling that they belong to a meaningful social group. In this sense, group membership can be interpreted as “a psychological state of self-categorisation” (Hogg, 1992). Therefore, identity is not intended as a single, inner category but as the product of social relations, as being constructed through interactional processes that involve language and any other form of symbolic exchange (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). This means that one does not have a single but multiple selves that derive from processes of association to, and differentiation from, one category of people or another (Lawler, 2012: 8). The fact that individuals have multiple identities also means that there must be multiple means through which these identities can be created, maintained or transformed. These include the use of written self-narratives (e.g., memoirs, letters) to reconstruct one’s self.

Indeed, Vitale’s self-narratives may not have answered solely the immediate need to communicate while being held in a mental asylum. The decision to utilise a written system of communication might have additionally afforded him a means through which to negotiate personal healing and confirm a new social identity. In dealing with the trauma of having left the organisation and a powerful reified group identity, Vitale declares to have redeemed his “true self” in the name

of God. As he wrote in one of his letters in 1973:

Mother, I can attest to being reborn. The hell I came from does not matter anymore, it is as if I had never lived that experience. I will dedicate my entire life to God. I am content with being at peace with Him, to be at peace with myself. Now I can say I really am my true self, and to find my true self I had to come to prison which does not bother me at all, instead I feel more and more free day by day. I feel that interior freedom that I did not know before when I was a slave to others and to myself. Mother, Maria, let's pray to the holy Virgin Mary that you too may also resurrect to real life loving God immensely. I hug and kiss you. Leonardo^[1].

While Leonardo Vitale represents one of the very few examples of *pentiti* who repented in the religious sense of the term and used written narratives to address the experience^[2], in other instances self-narratives appear to have been used by prominent *mafiosi* to deny any form of association with a criminal organisation like *Cosa Nostra* in order to rescue their public profile. This is the case for mafia boss Michele Greco.

The “Pope” of Cosa Nostra: Michele Greco

With these now-famous words, Michele Greco addressed the judges and jury members of the Court of Assise of Palermo moments before they retired to consider their verdict at the close of the first maxi-trial against the mafia.

I wish you peace, Your Honour, because peace is tranquillity of the spirit, of the conscience. And for the duty that awaits you, serenity is the foundation on which to judge. Those are not my words; they are the words of our Lord who commanded Moses: ‘When you must judge, decide with the utmost of serenity’. And I wish, Your Honour, that this peace accompanies you for the rest of your life and beyond²⁷.

Implicated by mafia defectors as the head of the Commission of *Cosa Nostra*, Greco became one of the key figures of the largest mafia trial in history, which opened in February 1986. The testimony of *pentiti*, including Tommaso Buscetta, Salvatore Contorno and Vincenzo Sinagra, outlined a profile of Michele Greco, which the Court of Assise summarised as:

Head of the Sicilian mafia and representative of its allied Camorra Family;
Administrator of a heroin laboratory located within his property;
Protagonist of the mafia war and its related crimes and accessory to numerous murders, including those of prominent political and mafia figures;
Wealthy landowner who, by means of intimidation and violence deriving from his association with the mafia, succeeded in a series of questionable operations;
Respected client of financial institutes, which backed his illicit commercial

enterprises;

A well-connected individual frequently associated with prominent political, financial and ecclesiastical figures²⁸.

“In conclusion”, the sentence read, “Michele Greco was one of the main protagonists of the years that so dramatically marked the city of Palermo, the Sicilian region, and the whole nation”. Called to account for hundreds of crimes before the Court in June 1986, Greco simply remarked: “Violence does not belong to my dignity”^[1]. This ambiguity represents a first, clear trait of Michele Greco. As the judges observed,

In light of the testimonies of mafia defectors, preliminary hearings and court hearings, the figure of Michele Greco has emerged in all its ambiguity.... He loves portraying himself as a ‘country gentleman’ by virtue of his enviable economic status, but he is described by Contorno and Buscetta as the person behind the deaths of all those victims guilty of belonging to rival mafia factions of the Corleonese Family^[2].

As would be described in the “Abbate + 459” Sentence (1987), since the late nineteenth century, the Greco family had extended its influence to the South Eastern fringes of Palermo, specifically in the *borgate* (suburbs) of Ciaculli and Croceverde Giardina. For over a century, the Grecos would remain one of the most powerful and influential mafia families in Sicily, with their authority being partly founded on established illegal activities, such as tobacco smuggling and drug trafficking. Despite his descent from a prominent mafia family and his personal role in the implementation of its illicit activities, it was not until the beginning of the 1980s that the name of Michele Greco was officially associated with the Sicilian mafia. In 1981, his name appeared in a report drawn up by chief police officer Antonino “Ninni” Cassarà. Based on the anonymous confessions of *Prima Luce* (First Light), the codename given to Salvatore Contorno, the “Michele Greco + 161 Report” implicated Michele Greco as the boss of bosses of the Sicilian mafia^[1]. On the basis of this document, drafted by police and signed by the prefect of Palermo, Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa, hundreds of suspects were arrested in June of the same year. More importantly, it set the stage for the inquiry that would lead to the maxi-trial of Palermo four years later. This report highlights the significance of the findings in relation to Michele Greco’s mafia role:

For the last twenty years, the impenetrability and enormous prestige surrounding Michele Greco and people close to him have prevented not only the acquisition of information regarding his illicit activities, but have also prevented us from gathering specific confidential information, which could be verified³².

Greco “shrouded in an aura of respectability, for many years had been a welcome guest in high social circles and noble families”. However, mafia defectors informed the magistrates of more clandestine activities taking place within Greco’s estate. They revealed, for

example, that the Favarella was home to a heroin refinery, and that dozens of *mafiosi* were once murdered there following a barbecue. According to some accounts, their bodies were roasted and subsequently fed to the pigs.^[2] In particular, Buscetta revealed how the Corleonese faction had forged a solid alliance with the Grecos in order to change substantially the balance within *Cosa Nostra* and begin their rise to power within it. This alliance was ratified in 1978 when the faction led by the Corleonese boss Luciano Leggio and his “lieutenants”, Totò Riina and Bernardo Provenzano, replaced Palermo mafia boss Gaetano Badalamenti with Michele Greco at the head of the Commission^[3]. The façade of neutrality that Greco had given to the Commission was in reality an effective cover for the Corleonesi to hide their strategy of expansion. This would eventually lead to the Second Mafia War in the early 1980s. Since the Commission’s approval was required for any “significant” murder, Michele Greco could be held responsible for the crimes attributed to him in his capacity as boss of bosses. For this reason, he was found guilty of all charges and sentenced to life imprisonment at the end of the trial in December 1987. Suddenly exposed in his more covert role as mafia associate and head of the Commission, Michele Greco saw his public image crucially damaged and that of his family substantially stained. At the same time, the negative light in which defectors had represented him had also compromised his role and identity within the mafia. To use a common Sicilian expression, in the midst of, and after, the mafia war, Michele Greco *piddiu a facci*; this is perfectly translated by sociologist Erving Goffman’s expression of “he lost face” (Goffman, 2005: 9–10). In order to regain *face* and, thus, reinstate his social identity, Greco protested his innocence maintaining the same line of defence throughout the trials and the years spent in prison. He began to enact the role of an affable peace-loving landowner whose life and family had been defamed by *calunniatori*

(slanderers):

The only cupolas I know belong to churches. I do not understand what *capo-mandamento*, *capo-famiglia* means. I have always minded my own business, my ordinary life as honest worker. The mafia I know is the mafia everybody knows through the newspapers.... Even to talk about drugs disgusts me. My money is clean. All that I possess is the fruit of my work and the heritage of my parents^[1].

In his strenuous public defence, Greco systematically accompanied the bucolic tales of his family and the deeds of his forefathers with strong appeals to faith. “*Mi chiedo ancora di cosa ho mafiato*” (I still ask myself how I have *mafiaised*). “Look, this is my mafia: work and faith in God”, Greco stated in an interview, showing off the tangerine trees that, even today, make the Ciaculli citrus estate famous internationally^[2]. Undoubtedly, Greco’s overt

religiosity and frequent references to the Bible have not gone unnoticed by the press. On the contrary, the “humble man” people saw sitting in front of the judges, with his hands joined in prayer, who quoted verses of the Bible and constantly referred to his deep religious faith, further accentuated what magistrates had defined Michele Greco’s “sombre and dramatic ambiguity”^[3]. In particular, the memoirs written while in prison after the end of the first maxi-trial would epitomise Greco’s apparent religiosity.

Michele Greco’s Memoirs

Thus began the memoir of Michele Greco addressed to the judges of the Court of Assise at the end of the maxi-trial in 1987^[4]:

Dear President, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Court, I have decided to write this memoir to have the possibility of telling you in these pages something about my real biography and the history of my family. During the court hearings, I answered questions but I have not had enough time to talk about my life. During a conversation, it is very hard to remember every detail. Alone, in the loneliness of my prison cell, I have had time to think and write. What I will write is *Gospel* [emphasis added]. You can easily check if you love real justice and real truth (Viviano, 2008: 15).

This one hundred page long handwritten document contains detailed accounts of his life and of the history of his family. He described, for example, the *Tenuta Favarella* as an “oasis of peace”, which “Divine Providence had blessed with late flourishing tangerine trees” (Viviano, 2008: 31). Michele Greco did not attempt to demolish the accusations and discredit the *pentiti* with empirical evidence; rather, he persistently tried to prove his innocence by referring directly to his family name, his status and social rank. As he wrote after almost two years after his arrest,

In this period of real interior life, a life full of suffering and prayer—I say of great suffering because moral tortures are the most atrocious—I am accused of ninety murders. These “gentlemen” who accuse me with their slanders of these misdeeds need to go and take a proper bath in the Jordan to clean their conscience. They cannot destroy families with infamy to satisfy public opinion. What they have done to my family is what the Nazis did to the Jews; the only thing there is left for them to do is to take us to extermination camps. In our society there are persecutors who desire these things. I call them “followers of Nero”,

as they are the greatest plague of modern society (Viviano, 2008: 109).

As previously mentioned in the case of Vitale's memoir, the adoption of selfnarratives may have similarly answered both the need to communicate with the outside world whilst in prison, as well as the intention to re-write a version of *self* that could overlay the image of mafia boss that the *pentiti* had portrayed, judicial authorities confirmed and mass media magnified. As sociologist Marco Santoro observed in relation to the role of written communication in the mafia, writing does not represent a neutral form of communication, but it has, and puts into practice, its own logic (2007: 132). Writing implies a greater level of reflexivity than speaking, in that it enhances the level of awareness and introspection, thereby creating a sort of distance that increases reflection, planning, and retrospection. In particular, personal narratives do not simply represent a description of facts, but reflect the "complicated procedures" that narrators employ to represent the desired identity (Lawler, 2012: 17):

[F]rom narrative perspective, the relationship between identity and autobiography is not that autobiography (the telling of a life) *reflects* a pre-given identity: rather, identities are *produced* through the autobiographical work in which all of us engage every day.... The narratives we produce in this context are stories of how we come to be the way we are. But it is *through* the narratives themselves that we produce our identities in this way (Lawler, 2012: 13).

In Michele Greco's memoir, the transposition of his own reality in an autobiographical text, allowed him to reflect *a posteriori* upon it, to reconstruct and restructure relevant episodes of their life. However, rather than simply recalling step by step a past experience, in the memoir the past is recreated and restructured in the process of writing, deliberately omitting those "facts" that are not consistent with the desired identity.

"People must read what I will write [...] what I will write is Gospel", Greco wrote in the last page. Commenting on this sentence, Sicilian writer Gaetano Savatteri, in his introduction to the book that contains the transcription of Greco's first memoir, argued that the autobiographical text addressed to the Judges of the Court of Assise, in reality, was addressed to the people of *Cosa Nostra* (Viviano, 2008: 10). However, having described the role of Michele Greco both inside and outside the mafia, and, above all, that of his family, the idea that the memoir was primarily addressed to external civil society also seems plausible. As Greco would write in his last memoir seven years later, it was in the eyes of society at large, including "his ninety-eight year old mother, his wife, and son" that he needed to reinstate his identity and the name of his family.

The 1994 memoir

After the end of the first maxi-trial, Michele Greco was kept under the harsh 41-*bis* prison

regime^[1]. During those years, he continued to be implicated in crimes committed while he was head of the mafia Commission. At a hearing on the 8th of April 1994, Greco handed another memoir to the judges (see Figure 1 below)⁴⁰. The opening section read:

Your Honour, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Court, I have been living in complete isolation and closely guarded for eight years, in a small cell where I have forgotten that even the sun exists. This long segregation and the lack of appropriate treatment for my physical suffering have destroyed me. The special detention in which I am kept is not appropriate for any human being; it is against humanity. I define my case as inhuman without any anger or resentment towards anybody. Yet, I can assert now that sufferings like these reinforce the soul.

Figure 1. Memoir of Michele Greco (1994: 1).

The opening section read:

Your Honour, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Court, I have been living in complete isolation and closely guarded for eight years, in a small cell where I have forgotten that even the sun exists. This long segregation and the lack of appropriate treatment for my physical suffering have destroyed me. The special detention in which I am kept is not appropriate for any human being; it is against humanity. I define my case as inhuman without any anger or resentment towards anybody. Yet, I can assert now that sufferings like these reinforce the soul.

This previously unknown document discussed for the first time here represents a shorter work than the one addressed to the members of the court in 1987. Despite certain similarities in terms of content and tone, the two memoirs differ substantially in many respects. In the latter memoir, for example, Greco dedicated only a marginal place to his personal life and family. There are some notable references to the events that had led to his sentence and to the *pentiti* who had “condemned” him:

With slanders and defamations, they have radically changed my biography. Public opinion has reduced me to pieces; the stain on my image has been magnified day after day, starting with the Chinnici trial. This bombardment of devastating news can destroy the image of any man and cause prejudices, because human nature is extremely fragile [...] In these long years, I have endured unspeakable tortures: I have been despised, humiliated, defamed, persecuted and used as a scapegoat.

In particular, having already spent several years in prison with the prospect of serving a life long sentence, this memoir represents the final attempt of Michele Greco to rest his case on appeals to faith. Quotes from the Bible and other religious references recur systematically throughout this memoir. Saint Paul, for example, is invoked in the manuscript to condemn “the earthly passions that afflict humanity” and as an example of endurance to pain and sufferance (see Figure 2 below):

One day, when I will meet Saint Paul, we will talk about our journeys in chains because, like me, Saint Paul also had to travel in chains. From the day I met these chains and the prison until today, when I am seventy years old, I have travelled along the dark valley of defamation and calumny. Along this cruel journey, the word of God has been my only comfort and the only light to illuminate my steps, and I am not just rambling when I say this; I am speaking from the experience I gained through atrocious suffering.

The “sense of humour of Saint Teresa of Ávila” is also cited in the memoir as a source of comfort for Michele Greco during the years spent in isolation:

Saint Teresa of Ávila, who suffered atrocious pain in her leg, constantly prayed for Jesus to help her alleviate the pain. But Jesus replied to her: ‘Teresa, this is how I treat my friends’. And Teresa replied: ‘No wonder you have so few friends’. I am suffering in the same way, but I am glad, because I am aware of being one of the few friends of Jesus.

Figure 2. Memoir of Michele Greco (1994: 8).

- Michele Greco's memoirs can be specifically analysed in terms of personal narrative performance, involving a communicative interaction between the narrator and the wider audience. As previously specified, it is only in the interaction between narrator and audience, and through a shared cultural understanding, that the overall narrative is complete (Lawler, 2012: 16). For the audience to be able to actively engage in interpretation and assume meaning for the episodes narrated, personal narrative must necessarily refer to, or draw on, wider cultural narratives. The Bible and other religious symbols, which are immediately and officially recognised as culture-specific, represent the cultural narratives from which Greco consistently drew to narrate his story and present a socially viable self, as distant as possible from the profile that mafia defectors had delineated. For example, he repeatedly referred to himself as a "true Christian" and a "true believer" to whom God had given the gift of strength, endurance and patience for the "terrible tests" he was facing (see Figure 3 below):

God tested Abraham, Isaac and Job. Why should He not test me too? Since my conscience is clean, today after years of suffering I can proudly shout: I am a true Christian! It is not easy to say this, but I say it without any fear of blushing in shame because I am not the monster that has been created with such superficiality.

The numerous references to Calvary, the place in which Jesus Christ was crucified, recurring throughout the memoir indicate that the role Greco intended to portray was that of a martyr whose patience and faith God was testing. "In this Calvary, I have never refused to answer the questions I was asked. I wrote two other memoirs and some letters, but I have not been believed, because the barbaric lynching of public opinion has discredited my image", Greco wrote. These frequent analogies with Biblical and evangelical narrations served to present the image of an "innocent martyr" through a set of symbols and narratives which are not only familiar to a wider audience, but also appeal to a tradition that is held highly in comparison to other forms of profane knowledge. This process allowed Greco to create a psychological identification and a cultural extension with his audience, affect it at an emotional level, and project his intended self through personal narrative.

When Michele Greco died in February 2008, Father Pietro Cappello of the *Maria Santissima del Carmelo* church in Ciaculli solemnly announced to the community that a funeral mass and procession would be held the following day in honour of their "beloved brother Michele Greco". These plans did not go ahead as expected as the police commissioner Giuseppe Caruso prohibited

the public funeral, allowing only a small ceremony in the cemetery church of *Santissimo Spirito* where the Greco family chapel was located. Nevertheless, the whole town gathered outside his house to show their respect through a religious silence. “May God welcome in the glory of his kingdom our father Michele Greco” was the phrase that concluded the funeral homily.

Figure 3. Memoir of Michele Greco (1994: 4).

Conclusion

This article has examined the memoirs of Leonardo Vitale and Michele Greco to analyse subjective reactions to the trauma of departing *Cosa Nostra* and its totalising dimension. Both *mafiosi* relied on written self-narratives in order to address a traumatized self and construct a coherent identity. While in Vitale's case his trauma appears to be related to a profound remorse for his past mafia actions and the need to justify his decision to abandon the organisation in the eyes of his mother and sister, of external civil society and in his own eyes, for Greco the trauma mostly relates to how the testimony of mafia defectors drastically changed his public profile and the image of his family following the Second Mafia War. Having stated that a self-narrative is deeply embedded in the individuality of the author's personal experience and in his attempt to construct a self-text for audience evaluation, these writings provide an ideal context to study how social identity can be negotiated and constructed, and the role that shared cultural values play in this process.

Vitale's self-narratives represent an example of "conversion" narrative determined by the spiritual crisis that led him to turn to the judiciary and reveal the structure and workings of *Cosa Nostra* at a time when the existence of the Sicilian mafia was still questioned. His memoir represents above all an example of selfreflective text aimed at negotiating personal healing and constructing a new self on a renewed religious identity. A similar need to assess his past, justify his decisions, and confirm a new identity inspired by a renewed faith in God is also evident in the letters sent to his mother and sister.

A common characteristic of the texts examined in this article are the repeated religious references and appeals to faith of both *mafiosi*. However, while in Vitale's case the religious dimension seems to play a crucial role in his process of disengagement from, and repentance for, his mafia past, the self-narratives of Michele Greco reveal a use of religion as the main means to rest his case. In his memoirs, religious values appear to work as a self-serving ground of moral justification that can conveniently free an individual of any legal and social obligations. Particularly his second memoir, replete as it is with biblical quotations and religious formulae, represents an extreme attempt by Michele Greco to redeem his "traumatized" public image and that of his family, exposed and publicly diminished by the negative light in which mafia defectors had portrayed them. It is the 1994 memoir that offers Greco's most characterising self-narrative, in which a religiously-inspired framework of meaning remains in place despite judicial evidence.

Here, he clearly distinguishes between two images and narratives of himself. On the one hand, he insists that the true image is that of a peace-loving farmer led by a profound religious faith. On the other, he claims to be victim of a deliberate construction by *defector's* testimony and judicial authorities of an alternative identity, namely that of a ruthless criminal guilty not only of having allowed hundreds of murders, but also of having betrayed the historical mafia families of Palermo to lean on the winning side of the Corleonesi.

In the last two decades, several autobiographies of mafia defectors have been published, particularly in the form of in-depth interviews with the press and researchers^[1]. The number is double if one includes the numerous memoirs published by former bosses of the American mafia^[2]. By comparison to this body of work, the novelty of the data presented here lies in the lack of

intermediation with which they were produced and the fact that they were not directly intended for publication. Indeed, both Vitale and Greco's memoirs were written in the isolation of a prison cell thus providing a more direct medium with which to explore individual approaches to the trauma caused by leaving *Cosa Nostra*. In general, however, the existence of written self-narrative such as memoirs and letters not only reveals a need to testify to one's personal experience, it also provides a useful context in which to examine issues of mafia disengagement, collaboration and repentance. Furthermore, and in relation to written self-narratives, it raises questions on the specific role of writing in these self-narratives. The approach delineated in this study may provide an interpretative model for future analysis across the existing body of self-narratives where a significant gap in mafia studies remains^[3]. A comprehensive comparative analysis of the different explanatory styles and intervening social conventions between the self-narratives of different generations of *pentiti*, and between men and women in the Sicilian and American mafia would provide insights that may also be relevant in terms of policymaking. Indeed, determining the different reasons and the ways individual *mafiosi* leave this criminal organisation might have a significant impact in the identification of potential weaknesses within the group and in the development of appropriate strategies to address them.

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