the italianist thirty-seven 2017·3

The Italianist

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: 0261-4340 (Print) 1748-619X (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/yita20

Italy's first postcolonial novel and the end of (neo)realism

Lucia Re

To cite this article: Lucia Re (2017) Italy's first postcolonial novel and the end of (neo)realism, The Italianist, 37:3, 416-435, DOI: 10.1080/02614340.2017.1407988

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2017.1407988

THE ITALIANIST, 2017
VOL. 37, NO. 3, 416–435
https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2017.1407988

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Italy's first postcolonial novel and the end of (neo)realism

Lucia Re

Department of Italian, University of California–Los Angeles, USA

ABSTRACT

In this article, I argue that Ennio Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere* (*A Time to Kill*, 1947) is both the first Italian postcolonial novel and a highly complex literary work that should be acknowledged as a major text of twentieth-century literature. I discuss the hermeneutic function of parodic intertextuality in *Tempo di uccidere*, and its relationship with Dante's *Commedia*. *Tempo di uccidere* not only subverts many tenets of neorealism (and may therefore in some respects be compared to Italo Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*), but it also exposes the violence inherent in the realist novel as a mode of representation. The article shows how Flaiano highlights hermeneutic issues of misreading, misrepresentation, and the violent erasure of the other, ironically prophesizing its own misreading by critics. Critics and readers have in fact – the article shows – consistently misrepresented, obfuscated, or glossed over the rape and murder of an Ethiopian woman that Flaiano unequivocally places at the centre his text. *Tempo di uccidere* is a multilevelled, modernist and ultimately postmodernist and allegorical text that – well before Edward Said articulated his own critique – disavows the violence of the realist novel and its complicity with European imperialism.

KEYWORDS

Ennio Flaiano; *Tempo di uccidere*; Italian postcolonial novel; realism and postmodernism; Edward Said; culture and imperialism; Italy and Ethiopia

SOMMARIO

In questo saggio sostengo che *Tempo di uccidere* (1947) di Ennio Flaiano è non solo il primo romanzo postcoloniale italiano, ma anche un'opera letteraria di grande complessità, e da considerare un testo fondamentale del ventesimo secolo. La discussione verte sulla funzione ermeneutica della parodia e l'uso dell'intertestualità nel romanzo, e soprattutto il rapporto con la *Commedia* dantesca. Il romanzo di Flaiano non solo sovverte molti dei presupposti e delle certezze del neorealismo (ed è per molti versi dunque paragonabile a *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* di Italo Calvino) ma denuncia anche la violenza intrinseca al romanzo realista come modalità di rappresentazione narrativa. Il saggio mette in luce come il romanzo di Flaiano pone in primo piano questioni ermeneutiche che hanno a che vedere con la falsa interpretazione, il travisamento e la violenta appropriazione e negazione dell'altro, profetizzando dunque ironicamente il proprio travisamento da parte di molti critici. Infatti il saggio dimostra che critici e lettori hanno con sorprendente continuità travisato, ignorato o cercato di offuscare lo stupro e l'assassinio di una giovane donna etiope che Flaiano ha inequivocabilmente collocato al centro del proprio romanzo. *Tempo di uccidere* è un

PAROLE CHIAVE

Ennio Flaiano; *Tempo di uccidere*; romanzo postcoloniale italiano; realismo e postmoderno; Edward Said; cultura e imperialismo; Italia e Etiopia

CONTACT Lucia Re re@humnet.ucla.edu Department of Italian, University of California – Los Angeles, 212 Royce Hall, Los Angeles, California 90095-1535, USA

romanzo a molti livelli, allegorico e modernista, e per alcuni aspetti postmoderno, che–anticipando le posizioni critiche di Edward Said – ripudia la violenza del romanzo realista e ne denuncia la complicità con l'imperialismo europeo.

'L'imperialismo, come la lebbra, si cura con la morte.'

The novel *Tempo di uccidere* (*A Time to Kill*) by Ennio Flaiano, from which the above epigraph is taken, was published in 1947, at the height of neorealism in Italy.[1] It was Flaiano's first novel, and also his last. After *Tempo di uccidere* in fact, Flaiano, who was born in Pescara in 1910, and died in Rome in 1972, went on to write mostly – though not exclusively – for the cinema, co-authoring among others most of the screenplays of Federico Fellini's early films, including masterpieces such as *Luci del varietà*, *Lo sceicco bianco*, *I vitelloni*, *La strada*, *Le notti di Cabiria*, *La dolce vita* and *8 1/2*. In this article I will not go into Flaiano's work as a screenwriter, nor his production as author of satirical, ironic, and darkly humorous short works, including short stories, narrative fragments, and aphorisms,[2] but I would like to suggest that his later work is profoundly, if indirectly, related to his novel, in the sense that it constitutes a continuation of and shift in his thinking about the question of representation in the contemporary era after he effectively, with *Tempo di uccidere*, disposed of the novel as a mode of writing, or in a sense, killed – I will argue – the novel itself as a mode of realist or even neorealist representation.

The year 1947 was when some key novels of Italian neorealism appeared, including *Cronache di poveri amanti* by Vasco Pratolini, *Il compagno* by Cesare Pavese, *Spaccanapoli* by Domenico Rea, *La Romana* by Alberto Moravia, *Il cielo è rosso* by Giuseppe Berto, *Dentro mi è nato l'uomo* by Angelo Del Boca, and the more atypical *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* by Italo Calvino. Although *Tempo di uccidere* received the premio Strega in 1947 (only four months after it was published), it was severely criticized immediately at the time by critics – Marxists and non-Marxists alike – for its supposed betrayal of realism, for its nihilism and surrealism, for its lack of a positive hero, of political commitment, and of a recognizable, unified, linear and coherent narrative development.[3] The novel was then promptly forgotten for the most part, and it is only rarely mentioned even today among the major novels of the Italian twentieth century.[4] The references one finds to it are usually only in connection with the history of Italian colonialism in Africa and its extended postcolonial aftermath.[5] The novel in fact is set in Ethiopia around 1936, at the moment of Fascism's invasion and occupation. Italian imperialism was the last manifestation of European colonialism, arguably the most belated manifestation, and also represents its end. African independence movements in fact began gaining strength right after World War I, and Italy started to think aggressively about bolstering its tiny colonial power and to create a real empire only after World War I, under Fascism, when the age of imperialism was already waning. Although or perhaps because it was belated, Italian imperialism in Africa under Fascism was extremely aggressive and violent; far from being kinder and gentler than its predecessors – as often assumed in light of the myths of 'the good Italian' or 'italiani brava gente', it effectively revealed and exposed in an accelerated and

compressed way the true face of colonialism and imperialism. And although Italy was the first colonial power to lose its colonial possessions during World War II, it also had the unprecedented distinction of being the first European power officially to legislate racial difference, mandating in Ethiopia the absolute separation of Italians and Africans.[6]

I would like to argue that Ennio Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere* is not only a major Italian novel of the twentieth century, but that it is a masterpiece of postcolonial narrative as important for world literature as Gillo Pontecorvo's *La battaglia di Algeri* (*The Battle of Algiers*) is for world cinema. While Pontecorvo's film has received much international attention both for its politics (and multifaceted approach to 'the real') and for its complex and innovative style and formal qualities,[7] Flaiano's novel has hardly been given the sustained critical readings it deserves, nor has its role in the Italian tradition of the novel been acknowledged. Yet, like Italo Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, with which it shares a tendency to deconstruct the assumptions of neorealism,[8] *Tempo di uccidere* is a complex literary text that can be read on several related and interconnected levels, one of which is a pointed political critique not only of Fascism, but of imperialist colonialism as a whole phase of world history and of Western ideology that happens to coincide with the history of the realist novel, of which neorealism is an offshoot.[9]

My thesis is that in disposing of the traditional novel as a mode of realist and neorealist representation, Flaiano makes *Tempo di uccidere* into a multileveled, modernist, and ultimately in some ways even postmodernist allegorical work, structurally similar to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, a text with which it has a parodic relationship. I understand parody in Linda Hutcheon's terms, not necessarily as a comic or debunking reversal of a predecessor text, but rather as 'ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality'.[10] And I am borrowing my use of Dante's fourfold typology and allegory to read the modernist novel from Fredric Jameson.[11] There are indeed four main levels of meaning in the novel by Flaiano.[12] The first is simply the literal level, the story of the misadventures of a lieutenant of the Italian army in Ethiopia – he is called throughout simply the Lieutenant – *il tenente*. The second level is the historical and political level. The third is the existential and moral level, which has to do with universal human issues of choice and ethical rather than legal responsibility. And there is, finally, a philosophical level, which has to do with rationality, and the ability (or inability) of the human mind to deal with contradiction, uncertainty, and radical doubt. The Lieutenant's journey through what is described as a kind of African *Inferno*, and then Purgatory, leads eventually to a sort of salvation.

At the start of the novel is the Lieutenant's rape and murder of an Ethiopian woman, Mariam, and his criminal attempts to cover up his deeds. The consequences and context of that crime, and the protagonist's punishment and atonement as he contracts the plague and endures horrible anguish and pain before finally being miraculously cured, form the core of the allegory's *fabula*. In the conclusion, the Lieutenant is effectively exonerated of all crimes and responsibilities and free to return home to his angelic wife, who has been faithfully awaiting him and, even in her invisibility, is a redemptive figure of salvation and a beacon like Dante's Beatrice.

There are multiple and sometimes explicit parallels with Dante's *Comedy* in the novel. In the first line of the first chapter, the protagonist is amazed to be alive ('Ero meravigliato di essere vivo', p. 7) and awake in a landscape that appears otherworldly and nightmarish. In

this bewildering and ambiguous bush (a kind of Dantesque 'selva oscura'), punctuated by haunting and uncanny human, vegetal and animal forms that seem simultaneously dead and alive, the Lieutenant loses his way: 'mi vidi perduto' (p. 15), literally 'I saw myself lost'. From the very beginning, the novel makes us conscious of the text's self-reflexiveness, and of the act of narration, in which – much like Dante the Pilgrim and Dante the Poet – protagonist and narrator can never completely coincide, except perhaps at the very end of the narrative. The protagonist will have to live, recognize, and acknowledge the depth of the horrors committed and exposed in the African *Inferno* in which he has lost his way before starting on a path of ascent towards a kind of expiation and (in Chapter 6) purification, that will putatively reunite him with his beloved. The perilous double crossing of the river the Lieutenant must undertake, and the process of both remembrance and forgetting he goes through, recall Dante's Purgatorial rivers, Lethe and Eunoè, in the second *cantica* of the *Comedy*.

While the protagonist has no map that may usefully chart his progress in the journey (the one he tries to use in Chapter 1 turns out to be outdated and completely inadequate), the Second Lieutenant (*sottotenenete*), to whom the protagonist has putatively been telling part of his story, functions as a parodic Virgil figure. He is the intellectual guide, the one who eventually puts all the pieces of the puzzle together and clarifies everything, throwing light – however ironically and even cynically – on the meaning and unexpected consequences of each of the Lieutenant's steps and encounters, and explaining to him how and why he will be, in the end, entirely exonerated and saved.

That this final redemption and exoneration are but shallow and even convenient fictions is made clear by the protagonist's ironic sense at the end of the final chapter (Chapter 7, significantly entitled 'Alcuni punti oscuri'), that this 'Paradise' is finally undeserved, that it is nothing but a lucky, fortuitous turn for him in spite of his heinous actions: 'Paradiso che si conquista, a volte, con le pessime azioni' (p. 233). The ending, where protagonist and narrator finally become one, effectively suggests that no healing or forgiving is possible. The protagonist/narrator thinks he can still smell the scent of Mariam's body, yet he realizes that it is his own decomposing flesh that he smells even as he is getting on the boat back to Italy and Paradise. His illness may not literally be 'the plague', but rather the plague stands for a moral and ethical failure, a chronic and cowardly propensity to discrimination, violence and abuse.[13] This is, effectively, a total inversion of the Dantean subtext, and a far cry indeed from the general ethos of forgiving, condoning, and forgetting in postwar and postcolonial Italy. Even the Second Lieutenant's 'reading' of what happened is thus contested by the text at the political and moral level, and his authority disputed at the end of the novel. Most readings of the novel have failed to grasp the multileveled depth of Flaiano's allegory, as critics have often considered only one of its dimensions – most often the literal one – and have almost consistently ignored the difference between protagonist and narrator, or *fabula* and emplotment, collapsing the two and even sometimes misidentifying them as one, blind to the novel's multiple ironies (sometimes interpreted simplistically as just 'bad faith') and to the unreliability of the Virgil figure (the Second Lieutenant).

In addition and contrast to the Dantean subtext, the novel – and this is one of the elements that make it come close to the postmodern mode – is traversed by multiple, encyclopedic intertextual references and citations ranging from the Bible to

Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe, Dostoevsky, Joseph Conrad (it is interesting to note that Flaiano shared with Calvino a profound interest in Conrad's work, especially the African novel *Heart Of Darkness*), Manzoni, Mallarmé, Gide, and Sartre, to non-literary works, for example medical textbooks about leprosy, and less dignified texts such as popular songs, second-rate colonial and romance novelettes, as well as magazines and comic books. Unlike Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Flaiano's novel does not allow the different intertextual allusions and the different levels of its allegory ultimately to coalesce and become reconciled and united in a single pattern, a single volume leading to a beatific and complete vision. On the contrary, through its parodic intertextuality the novel intentionally exhibits an ironic discrepancy and non-coincidence among the various levels, a discrepancy or disharmony that in my view makes this a modernist text as well as a postmodernist text, not unlike, for example, Joyce's *Ulysses*.[14]

The postmodern, to paraphrase Lyotard, puts forward the unrepresentable in representation itself. Therefore the postmodern need not necessarily be seen as the result of a historical rupture with realism and high modernism connected to the cultural practices of late capitalism, but may be tracked as a current, a tendency within modernism itself. In the discourse of the postmodern, the distinction between the real and the unreal is problematized, as are the lines that attempt to separate fiction and non-fiction, history and fabrication, subject and object, self and other, text and world, and even narrator and reader. Linear progression, consistent meaning, and any univocal pattern are resisted and exposed; unity, essence, hierarchy and order are challenged. In Flaiano's own words, the novel – although in his view essentially itself a thing of the past, a corpse – was in constant need of being rewritten and reworked; it could never be considered closed.[15] Writing novels increasingly represented in his eyes a misguided attempt by some authors desperately to construct a linear representation that cannot in any way correspond to reality.[16] Writing itself became suspect to him: 'Dire io scrivo mi è parso sospetto'.[17] In *Tempo di uccidere*, one of the most ironic moments is when the Lieutenant lies to the medical officer and pretends to be a novelist interested in the plague in order better to document someone else's real story. Ever the ironist, in 1972 Flaiano imagined a future encyclopedia entry about himself as a memorialization of the death of the novel through its apocryphal title: 'Giornalista e scrittore, autore anche di un romanzo, *Tempo di morire* (concediamo a quest'ipotetica enciclopedia una citazione inesatta). Scrittore minore satirico dell'Italia del Benessere'.[18] For Flaiano, the traditional novel as a work of cohesive, realist, and linear narrative representation was entirely exhausted with *I promessi sposi* (and coincidentally, Manzoni, like Flaiano, wrote only one novel, and ended up repudiating the novel altogether as a mode of representation), while – Flaiano explained – 'il problema dell'arte oggi è un problema insolubile'.[19] Shorter forms, stories, sketches, aphorisms, fragments, and reflections became the least objectionable form of representation and writing for him: 'Sono portato alla nota, allo schizzo giornaliero, alle cose che dopo formeranno un volume'.[20]

Significantly, Flaiano admired Joyce, while the only Italian novelist he consistently professed to respect was Gadda, a writer who, in the words of Guido Guglielmi – himself a protagonist of and an authority on the postmodern turn – entirely dismantled the hegemonic form of the canonical novel and of realist narrative representation.[21] In his two volumes devoted to Italian narrative prose in the twentieth century, Guglielmi discusses the dissolution of the traditional realist novel and the emergence of multiple

shorter and less totalizing narrative forms (offering limited, multiple, even irreconcilable and less coercive perspectives on and glances at the real) as the only feasible narrative paradigm, even for the novel. In addition to Gadda, Guglielmi examines authors such as Joyce, Borges, Savinio, Palazzeschi, Pirandello, Manganelli and Calvino.[22] These authors reject the canonical realist novel (and any form of totalizing narrative representation) because 'semplifica arbitrariamente il reale e lo ordina con violenza'.[23]Although he does not include *Tempo di uccidere*, Flaiano's novel arguably belongs in this same tradition, especially if we consider the novel's genesis, entirely based on the short story by the ironic title 'La scorciatoia' ('The Short Cut'; this also happens to be the title chosen for the American edition of the novel's translation by Stuart Hood).[24] 'La scorciatoia' eventually became the first chapter of *Tempo di uccidere*, and the novel is developed as a series of returns, reinterpretations ramifications, and reconfigurations of that initial story, its events, their significance and consequences on multiple levels.[25]

Despite its postmodern richness and complexity, *Tempo di uccidere* is unlike Joyce's *Ulysses* (with which, however, it shares a parodic take on the Ulysses myth): it is miraculously easy to read, and in fact so captivating that once begun, it is very hard to put it down. I will not go into the intricacies of all the different dimensions of *Tempo di uccidere*, but will limit myself to some remarks on what are in my view some of its most significant aspects.

Much like Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, *Tempo di uccidere* is based on the author's own historical and political experience. Experiential, witness-based accounts of real and dramatic events of historic or social and political significance are very much at the core of neorealist narrative. Calvino wrote about the anti-Fascist Partisan resistance in which he was directly involved, while Flaiano wrote about the Ethiopian campaign in which he took part as an officer of the Italian Fascist occupying army. Like Calvino, Flaiano chose, however, to de-personalize and distance his narrative, making a fictional character into the protagonist, a character who could thus assume a larger symbolic dimension, transcending the limits of individual experience, though not the limits of the real, and of concrete historical time, and recognizable geographical space. In Flaiano, the topography of the Ethiopian conquest, Adua, Axum, Gondar, Italian East Africa, Massaua, the Red Sea, is clearly and unmistakably delineated for the reader, as is the cowardly and despicable character of the Fascist aggression and racist ruthlessness.[26] At the same time, Flaiano chooses to avoid any over-detailed 'reality effect' in the (neo)realist manner because he does not wish to limit the relevance of his text. This is indeed a novel about the Fascist aggression against Ethiopia, but it also aims to be about the plague of imperialism in all its forms, addressing at the same time the question of individual and collective responsibility and choice.

The protagonist in both novels – Calvino's and Flaiano's – attempts to orient himself through both space and time, and to find his way in what seems to him like a labyrinth or, rather, *a maze*. As readers, we follow him in that process, and we learn from it. There is a sense in both novels that narrative representation itself constitutes in fact a form of or rather an attempt at cognitive mapping,[27] or (to paraphrase Calvino) a 'challenge to the labyrinth'. The phrase 'Sfida al labirinto' is the title of an essay by Calvino published by the journal *Il Menabò* in 1962.[28] It is an essay that encapsulates Calvino's overall poetics throughout his entire literary career. Narrative representation, according to Calvino, must re-orient us in our standing towards history and the world, and in so

doing allow potentially for movement and for action, though it does not necessarily require or demand either. The reader remains always 'free', so to speak, to choose a path.[29]

Along with narrative representation as a form of cognitive mapping, however, Calvino's and Flaiano's novels share a labyrinth-like structure that is essentially rhizomatic. The narrative *fabula* of *Tempo di uccidere* may on the surface appear quite linear, in the sense that it is chronologically ordered, and even the progression Hell–Purgatory–Paradise may seem on the surface to be teleologically ordered and focused on cause and effect in that the protagonist apparently suffers a just malady in punishment of his crime prior to the process of expiation and consequential salvation. Yet Flaiano lays out this linear development only to question it and disrupt it, and in order to reveal its fallacies, gaps, and errors. Much like the outdated nineteenth-century map filled with exotic markers that the Lieutenant has been given by the Fascist military, this type of linear cause-and-effect narrative is a violent appropriation and misrepresentation of the space and time Flaiano's novel addresses. Events are therefore emplotted by Flaiano in different ways again and again as the text takes the reader back to them in a series of dizzying yet compelling loops. They turn out to mean and indeed to be something different, part of a different narrative fork and narrative path.

For example, the narrator takes us back multiple times to the events and even to the very place of his fateful encounter with Mariam and the rape that led to his being infected with the plague. In Chapter 4, after he has remorsefully began to acknowledge his crime and the fitness of the punishment received through Mariam's transmitting the plague to him, the Lieutenant is ready to kill himself with the same gun he used to kill Mariam, and even writes a last letter to his wife. Yet he saw no sores on Mariam's body, he reflects (p. 117). Perhaps she had worn the turban only because she was washing herself in one of the water pools formed by the river. The resemblance to the white turban that he will subsequently discover to be the mark of the untouchables – the lepers – may have been a mere coincidence. This particular review of the narrative emplotment of events leads to his reconsidering his decision to put an end to his life, and the narrative takes a different direction and meaning, only eventually to loop back once again.

After the Lieutenant shares with a medical officer his fear of infection (attributing it to a fictional engineer whose story he wants to write – he claims – when he goes back to Italy), the doctor explains to him that leprosy – still equivalent to a death sentence when Flaiano's novel was published – may take as long as decades to manifest itself in an individual who has been exposed to it. At this point the narrative doubles back towards the tragic, and the promise of salvation in Paradise evaporates for the protagonist. The doctor adds ironically: 'il suo ingegnere vivrà a lungo in questa terra promessa' (p. 127), thus subverting the Lieutenant's perspective of finally going to his promised land – Italy, his wife and his Paradise, and effectively contaminating heaven with hell. The narrative at this point discloses another possible path, and yet another twist. The Lieutenant has become so paranoid, his mind is caught in such a maze that he suspects the doctor knows the truth and is going to denounce him and have him arrested. The Lieutenant then attempts to kill him with his revolver, but the revolver fails because the magazine was empty. Yet he fears that the consequences of this attack may be just as bad as if he had indeed fired. He will be arrested. He therefore returns to the camp and prepares secretly to flee, only to hear at supper from the captain that the leave that he

had requested has finally been granted, and that he is now free to go. (This leave, however, in yet another narrative loop, will turn into a trap).

One of the most effective reversal and loops in the narrative involves the Lieutenant's plan to kill the thieving, repulsive, ultra-virile and ultra-Fascist Major – ostensibly a 'man of order' – who has become a typical colonial *padroncino*, stealing from the army the goods he sells and sleeping with native prostitutes while still keeping his wife's framed picture in the room. In order to kill him, the Lieutenant devises a plan to unscrew a bolt (*dado* in Italian, which also means dice) in the truck in which the Major is going to travel, calculating that given the steep incline of the narrow mountain road with many dangerous bends, the truck will go off the road and the Major will be instantly killed. From his vantage point where he can clearly see the spot where the road ends up in the river valley, he watches anxiously and, just as the time elapsed suggests to him that the truck must indeed have fallen off the road, he sees it in the valley running along slowly, like a little mouse. The Major must have – by sheer luck – discovered the unscrewed 'dado' and fixed it, and is now proceeding slowly to avoid any additional problems. The Lieutenant becomes convinced once again that he has and is lost; the damned 'dado' of fate has, as chance has it, rolled against him. He must now go back into the bush.

As some critics have noted, this passage alludes to Mallarmé's famous 'Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard'. The chapter that follows (Chapter 6) is the most postmodern, filled with twists and reversals. The protagonist becomes a Hamlet-like figure, torn by doubt, between life and death, guilt and self-justification, atonement and revenge, hope and resignation. All certainties seem to be called radically into question, including time and space. Is he in hell, or on the way to heaven? The irony of the 'dado' at the end of Chapter 5 reappears when we are taken back to the incident with the truck in the final chapter, at which point the Second Lieutenant explains that the Major is indeed dead, that the truck did fall off the road, but the accident was not caused by the unscrewed bolt; the bolt is in fact still in place. The truck that the Lieutenant saw crawling along like a mouse was not the Major's.

The novel is effectively filled with false starts, and turns taken only to go back to the beginning, to events and circumstances that change and mean different things, and have different consequences, with each narrative return. In a particularly cruel return to the site of the initial rape and murder, the Lieutenant learns that his revolver shot that night, overheard in spite of his attempt to muffle it, was ultimately the cause of the massacre of an entire group of 'brigands' (the name used by the Fascists for the native insurgents) by the Italian colonial troops, who savagely finished off even wounded, defenceless adolescents, and destroyed Mariam's entire village. We are therefore forced to go back to the site of the massacre we first saw through the Lieutenant's eyes in Chapter 3 and, this time, it becomes clear that the univocal teleological account of the rape and murder of Mariam that he has sought to impose as the master narrative (and as his road to Paradise) – entirely obliterating her perspective and the possibility of a different emplotment of events – must be seen in a larger historical and political context as a synecdoche of the Fascist violence perpetrated on Ethiopians and their land.

In Calvino, the recurrent metaphor of the entangled and bewildering place of the spiders' nests to which Pin returns again and again in a vain search for meaningfulness represents the rhizomatic dimension of events and their meanings, for which a (neo)realist novel can never really account. Calvino's intertextual use of the code of the

fairy tale in the novel effectively serves to undermine neorealist expectations. And Kim's restless and inconclusive ruminations in Chapter 9 of the *Sentiero* (the one to which Marxist critics most objected) constituted a reflection on this same narrative and cognitive incapacity to grasp and represent the complexity of real events without betrayal, violence and destruction. Calvino elaborated on this theme in the Preface to the 1964 edition of the novel, which bravely dissected both the novel itself and neorealism as a whole. Both novels, then, take us in a multiplicity of different directions, sometimes even in loops and circles, in a fashion similar to Jorge Luis Borges's famous short story, 'El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan' ('The Garden of the Forking Paths'). Both seek to reject the kind of linear, sequential, and forward-moving representation, teleology, and cause-and-effect explanation or emplotment of story, and of history or rather of historiography, that characterize much (neo)realist narrative.

In Flaiano's novel the limits of narrative representation as cognitive mapping become increasingly evident as the text reveals its multiple levels of signification. No single narrative practice of representation and no single epistemic orientation, for Flaiano, can provide us with a unified map to move seamlessly among the various levels, or bring them neatly together. For example, the novel's resolution condones the Lieutenant's behaviour and sanctions his innocence at the literal and legal level, but the novel indicates that it is profoundly problematic and does not really hold true at the political level or even at the moral level. In the final chapter, entitled 'Punti oscuri', the Second Lieutenant to whom the protagonist has been telling his story concludes 'nessuno ha colpa'.[30] In fact, the body of the woman that the Lieutenant killed has never been found by the authorities, and the other victim (the Major whom the protagonist believed he had also killed), turned out, as we have seen, indeed to have died, but in an unrelated accident. The Lieutenant, who feels increasingly sick throughout the narrative and becomes convinced he is irremediably ill as well as guilty, is instead ultimately revealed to be both healthy and innocent, and free to leave Africa and go back to Italy – his version of Paradise. The Second Lieutenant's explanation is that what happened was caused only by an unfortunate turn of events and circumstances for which the Lieutenant cannot be held responsible: 'una partita di dadi dove tutto è affidato al caso' (p. 236). But the Second Lieutenant's cynical phrase 'nessuno ha colpa. Tanto meno il dado' (p. 242) is, on a second yet unavoidable reading, ambiguous and ironic. Yes, it implies, to an extent all the Italian soldiers in Ethiopia were innocent, in the sense they were only doing what was asked of them by Mussolini for the good of the fatherland and in the name of the Fascist teleological master-narrative of manifest destiny and heroic imperial conquest; this higher good unfortunately involved some minor casualties along the way, or at least so they were told. Such is the epic narrative logic of war.[31] But while he wants to believe this, the Lieutenant suspects, and is haunted by the feeling that, he is really escaping his individual, moral and political responsibility.

The key sign that alerts the reader to this is the stench that the Lieutenant smells around him: the poisonous odour of something rotten (an allusion to *Hamlet*,[32] one of Flaiano's most beloved texts), which is in fact a recurrent symbolic motif in the novel. The stench may indeed emanate – the text suggests – from the Lieutenant's own body. He may indeed be sick after all. It is a sign of his corruption, his being rotten to the core. In terms of the rational and philosophical level of the fourfold allegory, the factual

conclusion is almost entirely unproductive, and ironically raises more questions than it solves regarding the rational 'truth' or 'reality' of what happened. As a matter of fact, the conclusion does not really conclude or close off the narrative at all. Rather, it forces the reader to retrace in the text all the discrepancies and incongruities, all the ambivalent signs that point to the conclusion's fallacy.

In much the same way, at the end of *Il sentiero* Calvino insinuates that the positive outcome for Pin, and his bond with the Resistance fighter Cugino, gloss over what we may call, adapting Flaiano's terms, a 'punto oscuro', the fact that Cugino has murdered Pin's sister not in an act of patriotic justice, but in a misogynist hate crime. Calvino's novel effectively rejects any epicizing and totalizing linear novelistic representation of the Resistance, and discloses to the reader the shadowy and darker dimensions of the war that many writers sought to elide or suppress. In both novels, violence against women is exposed as the emblem of the supposedly 'necessary' violence of historical progress and its totalizing narrative representation.

In *Tempo di uccidere*, even as the reader retraces his or her steps through the narrative path of interpretation, the hermeneutic process cannot finally be concluded or closed off. Rather, it sends the reader again and again through, as it were, not so much bifurcations as a series of loops, somewhat like the closed-circuit video installations that typify postmodernist art. (I am thinking for example of the video work of Bill Viola.) Flaiano's novel in this sense refuses to close itself off; it is circular and thus never-ending and therefore paradoxically it represents the end of the realist novel understood as an extended narrative that has a beginning, a middle and an end, and forces the reader along a single and finally unified path of interpretation.

Flaiano's choice of world and setting is in many ways more daring and controversial than Calvino's. Calvino chose to write about the Resistance, an experience of which most Italians were largely proud and that contributed deeply to shaping and reorienting their postwar collective and imagined identity. Meanwhile, Flaiano wrote about an experience that most Italians wanted to forget, or claimed to know nothing about: the violent colonial offensive against Ethiopia. Indeed, the collective repression – more or less unconscious – of Italy's colonial past and of its racism that has largely characterized postwar Italian culture (only very recently has the study of Italian colonialism began to develop seriously) has a lot to do with why Flaiano's novel – despite its greatness – has been almost forgotten or long hidden from sight. In an almost uncanny, ironic way, Flaiano's novel allegorizes or rather prophesies its own forgetting, its own repression; but this prophecy also serves the function of alerting the reader to the need not to forget, not to close our eyes to the past, which we must keep scrutinizing, re-reading and re-interpreting, rewriting.

Flaiano's Ethiopian diary, or rather 'notes', dating from the years 1935 and 1936 and published only in 1973, is entitled *Aethiopia: Appunti per una canzonetta*. It clearly conveys – much as the novel does – his disgust for the colonial and imperial enterprise in which he had become involved against his will, as a drafted officer.[33] It was the experience in Ethiopia in fact that precipitated Flaiano's awareness of his own anti-Fascism, an awareness therefore, and a political reorientation, that came earlier for him than for many other Italian writers and intellectuals who converted to anti-Fascism only at the end of the 1930s, or even in the 1940s. As he later explained,

> [La campagna di Etiopia fu] una Guerra cui ho preso parte e che ho odiato e che mi ha portato ventiquattrenne a ripudiare il fascismo e a desiderare che la cosa finisse, brutalmente, nella sconfitta – quella è stata una cosa di importanza enorme. Infatti ho visto come queste persone che noi andavamo a liberare erano invece oppresse e spaventate del nostro arrivo. La nostra funzione era soltanto una bassa funzione di prestigio colonialistico, ormai in ritardo.[34]

A fundamental intuition emerges in the pages of the diary, that would become, almost ten years later, the core of the novel, along with a large set of notes that scholars have identified among his papers.[35] At the basis of every colonial invasion – Flaiano writes in the diary – there is a male sexual urge 'alla base di ogni espansione, il desiderio sessuale', one that becomes all too easily a form of horrible sexual aggression and violence.[36] The novel in fact is centred on the rape and murder of Mariam by the protagonist. In the historical context invoked and stigmatized by Flaiano, it was indeed possible for an Italian soldier, as related for example to Enzo Biagi in a 1982 television interview by a seemingly entirely unrepentant Indro Montanelli (who at twenty-three signed up as a volunteer to go to Ethiopia), to buy a twelve-year-old girl without considering it an act of violence. This was because, Montanelli claimed, at that age young girls [in Ethiopia] 'erano già donne'. He also claimed that when he left Africa he sold the girl, 'un animalino docile', to another officer, who already had a little harem at his disposal.[37]

Flaiano's novel makes that reality come alive for the reader and, in contrast to Montanelli's nostalgic and deluded recollection, allows us to confront its horror. Although written in the past tense, the first-person narrative of *Tempo di uccidere* has the immediacy of a story told in installments as if the facts narrated had just happened, when they have not yet taken a shape that makes sense and seems fully coherent in the protagonist's mind. At various points in the narrative, which covers a period of three or four months, the protagonist attempts to recapitulate and interpret what has just happened and to choose a course of action accordingly. However, at the same time the reader has the distinct sense that – as happens in most traditional realist and neorealist novels – all may indeed be preordained and mapped out by the implied author – we just do not exactly know how yet. The narrator himself wants us to contemplate believing in fate or destiny in order to make us understand the protagonist's predicament as he seeks to understand what has happened.

By incrementally developing our own mental map of the events, both past and foreseeable, we begin to comprehend (or at least we think we understand) a lot more than the narrator himself admits as he tells the story. This technique is reminiscent of the novels of, for example, Henry James and allows for a substantial amount of irony. In other words, the reader is placed in the position – however illusory – of understanding that what the narrator discloses, the way he interprets facts, is far from complete and reliable and may at times even be the converse, perhaps even the opposite of the truth, because what he is disclosing are the protagonist's thought processes as they unfold in the maze in which he is progressively caught. The protagonist appears at times afflicted by an almost chronic self-delusion, a blindness that eventually becomes – even though the novel elegantly avoids any self-righteous political rhetoric – a metaphor for the attitude of Italians under Fascism, and vis-à-vis the colonial aggression against Africa.

Historians of Italian colonialism such as Angelo del Boca and Nicola Labanca have demonstrated that Italians had a vision of the African colonies that was ironically almost completely the opposite of the facts. This was in part the fault of Fascist propaganda, but it was also the product of a collective, unconscious libidinal desire, a fantasy to possess the exotic other. For example, Libya was depicted in the press and in the popular colonial novels as a promised land of palm trees and beautiful, welcoming 'black' women, while it was instead mostly desert and never fully conquered, apart from sections of the coast, owing to the ferocious, unrelenting resistance and guerrilla warfare of the local Arab and Berber populations. The situation in Ethiopia in the 1930s was not much different. The great majority of the Italian population believed the lies of the regime, which presented the Ethiopian war as a 'sacred duty', for the war (it was claimed) would bring land for the impoverished Italian peasants, and civilization to the primitive Ethiopians. Millions of Italian women were called upon to donate their wedding rings to contribute to pay for the sacred cause. As Flaiano writes in his diary, the typical colonial soldier arrived in Ethiopia dreaming of an entirely stereotypical exotic Africa, with a deluded sense of mission, entitlement and sensual adventure, which the films and songs of colonial propaganda fostered. He alludes in particular to the popular song 'Faccetta nera' or 'Little Black Face' – the *canzonetta* of Flaiano's Diary – that is one of the novel's most important subtexts. The novel by Flaiano may to a certain extent be read as a critical gloss on this song and on the teleologically oriented imperial master narrative to which the song adheres in an apparently naïve, delusional, and unquestioning, even joyful, way.

'Faccetta Nera' (1935)

Se tu dall'altipiano guardi il mare,
moretta che sei schiava fra gli schiavi,
vedrai come in un sogno tante navi
e un tricolore sventolar per te.
Faccetta nera, bell'abissina,
aspetta e spera che già l'ora si avvicina!
quando saremo insieme a te,
noi ti daremo un'altra legge e un altro Re.
La legge nostra è schiavitù d'amore,
il nostro motto è LIBERTÀ e DOVERE.
Vendicheremo noi Camicie Nere
gli eroi caduti liberando te!
Faccetta nera, bell'abissina,
aspetta e spera che già l'ora si avvicina!
quando saremo insieme a te,
noi ti daremo un'altra legge e un altro Re.
Faccetta nera, piccola abissina,
ti porteremo a Roma, liberata.
Dal sole nostro tu sarai baciata,
sarai in Camicia Nera pure tu.
Faccetta nera, sarai Romana,
la tua bandiera sarà sol quella italiana!
Noi marceremo insieme a te
e sfileremo avanti al Duce e avanti al Re!

'Little Black Face'

If you look at the sea from the hills,
young black girl, slave amongst slaves,
as in a dream you will see many ships
and a tricolour flag waving for you.
Little black face, beautiful Abyssinian girl,
wait and have hope because it'll soon be the time
when we will be with you,
we will give you another law, another King!
Our law is slavery to love,
our motto is FREEDOM and DUTY.
We Blackshirts will avenge
the heroes who died to free you!
Little black face, beautiful Abyssinian girl,
wait and be hopeful for it's almost time!
When we will be with you,
we will give you another law and another King.
Little black face, little Abyssinian girl,
we will bring you back to Rome a free woman.
You will be kissed by our sun,
and you will wear the Blackshirt too.
Little black face, you will be a Roman,
your only flag will be Italian!
We will march together with you
and parade in front of the *Duce* and the King!

The song tells a novelistic, future-oriented story of benign interracial love, redemption and liberation, and uses it as a framework for Fascist propaganda extolling Fascist Italy's civilizing mission.[38] As a matter of fact, the Ethiopian population was not at all welcoming, and despite the deployment of poison gas and aerial warfare, the Italian

army was unable to defeat the resistance, which continued undeterred after the occupation of the capital Addis Ababa and Mussolini's proclamation of the great Fascist Empire, which allegedly would free the Ethiopians from things like slavery, promiscuity, and savagery.

The novel makes amply clear, as historical sources such as letters and diaries confirm, that many of the Italian soldiers were profoundly demoralized on discovering a reality that completely contradicted the Fascist propaganda and their own exotic and heroic dreams. Corruption became rampant among the colonial officials and officers, a corruption represented in the novel especially by the character of the Major. The Fascist ideal of racial purity, and of maintaining a clear separation between the white Italian colonizers and the non-white Ethiopian women, was entirely contradicted by a reality of sexual exploitation, violence, and degradation, and that reality is in fact at the centre of Flaiano's novel. The naïve, almost joyful, and optimistic words and tone, and the seemingly harmless sexual fantasies of the song 'Faccetta Nera' are inverted in the novel's dark and tragic core, and revealed to be a horrible mystification.

As complex and multilevelled as *Tempo di uccidere* is, the tragic event from which the entire narrative unfolds is, in fact, entirely clear and unambiguous. Its meaning, consequences and implications, however, are multiple, complex and not easy to decipher. The Lieutenant, during a four-day leave, and while on his way to Asmara to look for a dentist to take care of a routine toothache, gets lost in the Ethiopian bush after his truck overturns, and he takes a wrong turn on foot while looking for what is supposed to be a shortcut. He comes across a young, unmarried, native woman – he is the one who calls her Mariam in his mind, a name that turns out to be generic and that in no way acknowledges her identity or voice – washing herself in a stream. He begins to watch her and fantasize about her. He then approaches her and touches her naked breast, but she appears terrified and pushes him away. He tries in vain to tempt her with gifts and money and, after a prolonged struggle, he finally forces himself on her. He is entirely indifferent to the fact that Mariam, forced to have sex with him, seems ashamed and does not even want to look at him (pp. 24–25). And yet, as was customary in parts of Ethiopia and Eritrea, Mariam now apparently thinks of herself as his wife.[39] He intuits with some dread, and even a temporary sense of shame, that she may consider the broken watch he has given her a kind of wedding ring, but then dismisses this as a savage woman's fantasy (p. 28). He subsequently decides to build a makeshift camp and spend the night in the open but, during the night, he is scared by a sudden noise. In the semi-darkness he mistakes the woman for a wild animal and shoots her three times with his revolver. In her horrible agony after being shot, Mariam howls and screams; the Lieutenant briefly contemplates seeking help but then decides that it is more convenient to kill her instead, after which he proceeds to bury her under a pile of rocks, seeking to erase all traces of the murder. As he washes himself, he realizes that he has a small cut on his hand but thinks nothing of it. Almost immediately after starting to walk away, he finds a shortcut leading to the main road, where he gets a ride from a military truck.

As well as a historically accurate, verisimilar representation of the sexual violence perpetrated by the Italian colonizers, the rape at the core of this novel may also be read as an allegory of the violence of narrativity itself, as Flaiano's critique of the realist novel, a form that is quintessentially violent because it mobilizes and channels desire,

forcing or seducing the reader towards a certain pleasurable and convenient interpretation which is merely a façade for a sadistic aggression that seeks the domination and exclusion of the other. Critics including Leo Bersani, Ulysse Dutoit and Teresa de Lauretis have, in different yet parallel ways, exposed the complicity between metonymic forms of narrativity and violence; de Lauretis even hypothesizes a structural, inherent connection between sadism and narrative in the western and realist tradition. In short, narrative produces meaning by mastering and violently subjugating the other.[40]

One piece of evidence for of this hypothesis and for the uncanny effect of this novel, more astonishing even than the gruesomeness and brutality of the rape and murder scene that Flaiano places metatextually at the centre of his first and final novel, is the way this episode has become a nearly universal blind spot, a site of misreading in Italian critical discourse about the novel. The Lieutenant's own wilful and deluded misreading of his crime, which recurs in his self-justification throughout the novel, then, becomes an uncanny prophecy of the novel's fate. Indeed, it speaks to the way the novel, any novel, may be a treacherous narrative mechanism. Even the most apparently matter-of-fact accounts of the novel avoid mentioning the rape, or try to elide it, minimize it or cover it up – just as the Lieutenant does. In his introduction to the influential 1980 Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli paperback edition, Sergio Pautasso defines the encounter as one of 'amore', followed by a 'ferimento casuale'.[41] One critic refers to it as 'blanda familiarizzazione',[42] another defines it a 'un rassicurante bagno d'amore',[43] yet another claims that the Lieutenant simply seduces the woman.[44] In 2010, the episode was summarized by another critic like this: 'Attracted by her youthful body, the Lieutenant remains to spend the night with her […] During the night, he kills the woman by mistake'.[45] As we have seen, however, only the initial wounding is perhaps unintentional or not deliberate, while the actual killing is entirely calculated. Yet another critic, Sergiacomo, claims that the Lieutenant is just 'incompetent' and wants to protect the woman he loves.[46] More than distaste or embarrassment, one may surmise that the reason for the seemingly contagious inability of many critics to acknowledge the rape and murder, their inability to read the novel even at its most literal level, is in fact that the rape of Mariam is a synecdoche for the rape of Ethiopia and its devastation. The collective shame and repression about Italian and European colonialism, imperialism, and racism, including their representation in narrative fiction, we must conclude, are still uncannily at work within contemporary literary criticism and history.

Yet all the hallmarks of the racist and misogynist discourse of Italian colonialism and imperialism are clearly present in Flaiano's account of the rape, and he makes sure that we can comprehend them.[47] Because Mariam is, in the Lieutenant's eyes, savage and 'uncultured', he assumes her to be naturally promiscuous. Like most rapists, the Lieutenant believes (in a mental process of wilful self-deception) that Mariam's rejection of his sexual advances means just the opposite, she must only be flirting, and she in fact wants to be taken. Alternatively, he thinks, she is only resisting because she hopes to sell her body at a higher price – she wants more for it. Both are fabrications based on no real evidence. In a similar way, Mussolini's propaganda and the imperial master-narrative minimized the meaning of indigenous resistance and claimed that the savage Ethiopians were eagerly waiting to be conquered and enlightened by the civilized Italians: a commonplace of imperialist as well as colonialist discourse. Italians would bring both civilization and wealth, for which the natives would be thankful.

In his Lieutenant's thought sequence during the rape scene, Flaiano goes on to display the pattern of logically contradictory thought that has been shown to be typical of Fascist rhetoric, a rhetoric whose power is not logical argumentation, but persuasion or rather brainwashing through ruthless assertion, lying, and forceful, dogmatic repetition. Umberto Eco's 1995 essay on universal or 'Ur-Fascism' offers a good capsule summary of this aspect of Fascist discourse.[48] First of all, according to Eco, the imaginary creation through propaganda of 'the other', a group of people and a way of thinking that are considered bad and/or inferior because construed as different, vicious, corrupt, uncivilized, and/or threatening, is needed for Fascism to exist. Secondly, although, or rather because, Fascism itself is based on a set of shifting, contradictory and irrational beliefs conveniently and strategically bound together and imposed through propaganda and forceful, aestheticized mythical narratives passed off as reality, Fascism abhors critical thought. Criticism, contradiction, and critical thought are anti-patriotic and anti-Fascist for Fascism, whose chief motto for its citizens was 'believe, fight, and obey'. The Lieutenant, in order to justify his actions, deploys in his own mind an argument that entirely contradicts his previous thoughts (which were, let us remember: Mariam must be flirting, she is naturally promiscuous, she is grateful and ready to be taken). Now, only seconds later, he thinks instead that she, being inferior, like a slave, must rightfully submit to him even against her will, she must surrender and be subjugated, like her fellow countrymen, who are losing the war against the Italian invaders.

One of the few readers who did not gloss over or cover up the rape was the director Giuliano Montaldo in the 1989 film adaptation starring Nicolas Cage and Giancarlo Giannini. Compared to the novel, the film may be attenuated in terms of violence, and lacking its critical and historical complexity, its metaphysical depth and ambiguous ending. Nonetheless, the film is on the whole more faithful to the letter of the novel than most of the critical commentaries. The fact that the film adaptation, even with a script co-written by Flaiano himself, had to wait until 1989 to be made is in itself a symptom of how controversial it was.

One of the most powerful rhetorical devices used by Flaiano in the novel is the restricted point of view of the Lieutenant himself. To a large extent, we are at least initially forced to see only what he sees, to track along with him through the twists and turns of his uncertain and circuitous path through the Ethiopian bush, and to inhabit his head and his thoughts. We become the Lieutenant's accomplices in a sense; we share his male gaze and his position. This is an identification that is almost impossible to convey with a movie camera. In the film in fact we mostly see Nicolas Cage, not through Nicolas Cage's eyes and mind, which would have required perhaps the sustained use of a subjective camera viewpoint, as in the first hour of *Dark Passage*, a film noir by Delmer Daves starring Humphrey Bogart, coincidentally shot in 1947.

Only after the first one hundred pages or so of the novel are we allowed – if indeed we in fact choose to do so – to break free of the protagonist and to begin to grasp the irony of his stubborn self-delusion and paranoia, although we are of course never entirely separated from him, since he remains the principal focalizer throughout the novel.

The distancing begins to occur, or is most clearly marked for the reader, when we realize how dramatically the Lieutenant has misunderstood the meaning of Mariam's white turban. For him the turban in which Mariam has wrapped her hair is an exotic marker that makes her look almost oriental and more seductive – a reincarnation of

one of the odalisques by the orientalist painter Ingres perhaps, or one of the tempting illustrations on the cover of *La domenica del corriere*. His vision is totally deluded, a fantasy that has no basis in reality. Flaiano here effectively anticipates many of the critical insights into the nature of colonialist orientalism by Edward Said. The white European's vision, both of the Orient and of Africa as well, are moulded, according to Said, by exotic fantasies and the projection of repressed and contradictory desires at once to possess and to annihilate the other, who is posited as both desirable and as radically different and savage.[49] Although Said does not discuss Fascism, it is clear that Fascist racism and imperialism are in a way only an extension and radicalization of orientalism.

Flaiano's brilliant intuition consists in ironically inverting the meaning of the white turban into its exact opposite, thus exposing the fallacy of the Lieutenant's sick, contradictory and violent imagination. It turns out – and the Lieutenant himself eventually later realizes this with a sudden sense of panic – that the white turban is in fact the mark of the leper. He is told, when he sees two young women in a village wearing the same turban as Mariam – the woman he has just raped, killed, and buried under a pile of rocks – that the white turban is meant to warn others not to come too close, in order to avoid contagion. A partial cure for leprosy became available only in the late 1940s – after the publication of Flaiano's novel – but, although the disease now no longer kills, it can still cause loss of limbs and mutilation. In the novel, the Lieutenant becomes convinced that he has contracted leprosy from Mariam, and the fact that the wound on his hand becomes swollen and numb seems to confirm this hypothesis, which constitutes in effect a death sentence.

Here, through this *contrapasso*, we see most clearly how Flaiano imitates Dante, though in a modernist key. In Dante's *Inferno*, the punishment ironically fits the crime. The illness that infects and tortures the Lieutenant is a fit punishment for the crime he committed, his violence against and destruction of Mariam's body and life.

The rest of the novel is devoted in large part to detailing the Lieutenant's desperate, irrational, and violent acts following his realization. Ironically this leads him to call into question not only his Fascism but also everything about his life, his identity and his beliefs. The illness becomes a key metaphor for the sickness and rot of Fascism itself, and of Fascist colonialism and imperialism in particular. Even more brilliant is a further twist of the narrative: it is Mariam's father, Joahnnes, an African askari war veteran, who, in the final phase of the narrative, after engaging in a fierce and prolonged struggle with the Lieutenant, finally heals him of the disease using a native remedy unknown to European medicine. Far from being savage and uncultured, the Ethiopian native thus displays his deeper wisdom, as well as other qualities such as courage, daring, and forgiveness, all of which contribute to the complete reversal of the Lieutenant's prejudices, allowing him at last to see just how blind and deluded he has been.

The ending, however, as I already anticipated, is in fact undecidable. There are several possibilities, each requiring another mapping, another going over of the text and reorientation among its signs. The Lieutenant may in fact still be sick, and therefore on his way to death. There is no possible cleansing or redemption for somebody like him. Mariam, on the other hand, may not have been sick at all, and the white turban she was wearing may have been a mere coincidence. Several elements in the novel point in this direction. Nonetheless, the consequences – at least the mental, spiritual, moral, and

political consequences – of that false belief have been momentous for the Lieutenant. Through this imaginary sickness, this leprosy, he has in a way been purged of his real mental sickness, of his racism and of his Fascism. This lack of a definitive and unequivocal closure does not represent a narrative failure on Flaiano's part, nor a refusal or inability to choose. It is certainly not an expression of Pirandellian relativism. Rather, it embodies Flaiano's understanding that no matter how much signs continue to multiply, proliferate, and contradict one another, we have a duty to keep questioning and interpreting real events, to construct and deconstruct plausible interpretations, and never to be content with the seemingly unitary, seemingly truthful, seductive and compelling stories that we are told, or that we read.

Notes

1. Ennio Flaiano, *Tempo di uccidere* in *Opere scelte*, ed. by Anna Longoni (Milan: Adelphi, 2010), p. 129. All references to the novel will be to this edition. In the 1930s and early 1940s, Flaiano worked mostly as an anti-conformist cultural journalist, publishing book, art and especially film reviews, although he also authored a number of short stories, and a farce (*La guerra spiegata ai poveri*, 1946) and collaborated on some screenplays and scripts, including the award-winning *Roma città libera* (1946) directed by Marcello Pagliero. After the publisher Leo Longanesi repeatedly demanded a novel from him and even promised an advance, Flaiano claimed that he wrote *Tempo di uccidere* in about three months. The novel – much to the author's surprise and chagrin – went on to win the Premio Strega.
2. An overview of Flaiano's life and works may be found in Gino Ruozzi, *Enno Flaiano: Una verità personale* (Rome: Carocci, 2012); and Marisa Trubiano, *Ennio Flaiano and his Italy: Postcards for a Changing World* (Lanham, MD: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010).
3. See the detailed account provided by Lucilla Sergiacomo, *Invito alla lettura di Ennio Flaiano* (Milan: Mursia, 1996), pp. 205–06. See also Lida Buccella, ed., *Ennio Flaiano e la critica: Ricognizioni bibliografiche* (Pescara: Ediars, 1993).
4. No mention of the novel is made for example in the many editions of Gianfranco Contini's comprehensive (and still canonical) *La letteratura italiana: Otto-Novecento* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2002; first publ. 1974), nor is the novel mentioned, for instance, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Novel*, ed. by Peter Bondanella and Andrea Ciccarelli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). However, the novel has had and still has some ardent admirers. See for example Italo Alighiero Chiusano, 'Flaiano era un'altra cosa', in *Altre Lune* (Milan: Mondadori, 1987), pp. 288–91; and especially Giorgio Pullini, 'Ennio Flaiano', in *Letteratura Italiana: I contemporanei*, 5 vols (Milan: Marzorati, 1974), V, 667–90. Gino Tellini devotes only a few lines to *Tempo di Uccidere* in *Il romanzo italiano dell'Ottocento e Novecento* (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), p. 429, and sees the novel as the marginal work of a disenchanted secular ironist.
5. In the specific field of colonial and postcolonial literary studies, there are several discussions of the novel and its purported influences. See for example the essays collected in the volume *Coloniale e postcoloniale nella letteraratura italiana degli anni 2000*, ed. by Silvia Contarini, Giuliana Pias and Lucia Quaquarelli (= *Narrativa*, 33–34 (2012)), especially the articles by Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, Giuliana Benvenuti, Franco Manai, and Tomasz Skocki. Several critique the novel's ambiguities and what appears to be its lack of a clear, unequivocal anti-colonialist stance or even its collusion with Fascist imperialism. See Derek Ducan, 'Italian Identity and the Risks of Contamination: The Legacies of Mussolini's Demographic Impulse in the Work of Comisso, Flaiano and Dell'Oro', in *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory*, ed. by Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 99–123. Nuanced interpretations of the novel's take on colonialism include Trubiano, *Flaiano and his Italy*, pp. 37–73, Loredana Polezzi, '*Mal d'Africa* and its Memory: Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Pre- and Postwar Readings of the Italian Presence in

Africa', in *War-Torn Tales: Literature, Film and Gender in the Aftermath of World War II* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 39–64; and Giulietta Stefani, 'Coloniali: Uomini italiani in Africa da Flaiano a Lucarelli', *Zapruder*, 23 (2010), 41–56. See also Roberta Orlandini, '(Anti)-colonialismo in *Tempo di uccidere* di Ennio Flaiano', *Italica*, 69, no. 4 (1992), 478–88.

6. See Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare: Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), p. 413. Among the now many historical studies of Italian colonialism, Labancass is still one of the most comprehensive and even-handed, along with Gian Paolo Calchi Novati, *L'Africa d'Italia: Una storia coloniale e postcoloniale* (Rome: Carocci, 2011). On colonialism in Ethiopia, see especially the essays collected in Riccardo Bottoni, ed., *L'impero fascista: Italia ed Etiopia (1935–1941)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008). In English, see Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, *Italian Colonialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
7. See for example the essays by Nicholas Harrison and others in *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 9, no. 3 (2007), an issue entirely devoted to the film.
8. See Lucia Re, *Calvino and the Age of Neorealism: Fables of Estrangement* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
9. Flaiano may thus be seen as a precursor of Edward Said, who was one of the first critics to highlight how the Western novel in its very structure and in its stories validated the worldview of imperialism. See Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).
10. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 93.
11. I am thinking especially of Jameson's now classic book on Wyndham Lewis, *Fables of Aggression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), and *The Political Unconscious*: *Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).
12. Although several critics have noted the presence of allegory in the novel, there has been no attempt to highlight its manifold complexity and parodic relation with Dante. On the allegorical character of the novel, see for example Giorgio Barberi Squarotti, 'Un romanzo esemplare', in *Tempo di uccidere: Atti del convegno nazionale Pescara 27–28 maggio 1994* (Pescara: Ediars, 1994), pp. 7–12; and Marilyn Schneider, 'Allegory and Anti-History in Ennio Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere*', *Stanford Italian Review*, 4, no. 1 (1984), 107–21. Schneider highlights especially the turn to Biblical imagery and language.
13. See, in this regard, the letter sent by Flaiano to Jules Dassin on 26 May 1950, now in *Soltanto le parole: Lettere di Flaiano (1933–1972)*, ed. by Anna Longoni and Diana Rüesch (Milan: Bompiani, 1995), p. 30: 'Nel mio libro la conclusione drammatica è questa: il protagonista, alla fine, ha di nuovo il sospetto di non essere guarito. Forse non si tratta più di lebbra, si tratta di un male più sottile e invincibile ancora, quello che ci procuriamo quando l'esperienza ci porta cioè a scoprire quello che noi siamo veramente'.
14. For a postmodernist reading of at least parts of *Ulysses*, and of course of *Finnegans Wake*, see (for example), Jean François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne* (Paris: Minuit, 1979) and Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987).
15. See Ennio Flaiano, *Opere 1947–1972*, ed. by Maria Corti and Anna Longoni (Milan: Bompiani, 1990), pp. 1408–09 (from an undated manuscript): 'La mortificazione del successo – e la certezza di non esservi tagliato – le provai durante la pubblica premiazione, in un albergo romano, del mio primo e unico romanzo: *Tempo di uccidere*. […] Ricevevo un premio per un romanzo che ora trovavo tutto da riscrivere. […] Non ho quindi angosce per il futuro: il mio modesto successo ha tutta l'aria di essere l'ultimo'. This unhappiness with the novel and the urge to cut it up and rewrite it over and over may be tracked in part through the many author's variants, elisions and contradictory contaminations among the various later editions of the novel (1954, 1963, 1966, 1968) that are more significant and revealing than critics have thus far acknowledged.
16. Interview with Gianni Rosati [1972], in Flaiano, *Opere: Scritti Postumi*, ed. by Maria Corti and Anna Longoni (Milan: Bompiani, 1988), p. 1199.
17. Ibid., p. 1201.
18. Interview with Italo Alighiero Chiusano [1972], in ibid., p. 1220.

19. Interview with Aldo Tassone [1972], in ibid., pp. 1237–41. For Flaiano's views on Manzoni's novel, see also the interview with Chiusano, in ibid., pp. 1217–18.
20. Interview with Gianni Rosati, in ibid., p. 1203. On Flaiano's uneasiness with the genre of the novel and his use of *Tempo di uccidere* as a means to liberate himself from it, see Anna Longoni, '*Tempo di uccidere* e la narrazione frantumata: Il romanzo e l'altro Flaiano', in *Tempo di uccidere: Atti del convegno nazionale*, p. 24.
21. Guido Guglielmi, *La prosa italiana del Novecento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), pp. 211–43.
22. See especially the chapter entitled 'Le forme del racconto', in *La prosa italiana del Novecento, II: Tra romanzo e racconto* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998), pp. 3–21.
23. Guglielmi, *Prosa Italiana del Novecento*, p. 20.
24. Ennio Flaiano, *The Short Cut*, trans. by Stuart Hood (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahi, 1950). The translation was initially published in the British edition as *Mariam* (London: John Lehman, 1949). In the later British edition, the title was changed to *A Time to Kill* (London: Quartet Encounters, 1992). Although I have not conducted a detailed study of the 1992 edition of the translation, it seems to be identical to the 1950 one, and does not take into account the cuts and changes made by Flaiano to the later Italian editions.
25. The manuscripts of the various drafts of the novel, studied by Anna Longoni, also support this reading. See Flaiano, *Opere 1947–1972*, pp. 1409–13.
26. Nicola Labanca in *Oltremare* singles out *Tempo di uccidere* as the most historically insightful novelistic representation and critique of Italian colonialism, even compared to more recent narrative attempts. Since Labanca published his study, Gabriella Ghermandi's masterful novel *Regina di fiori di perle* (Rome: Donzelli, 2007) has provided an invaluable new narrative account of the war and its aftermath seen from an Ethiopian point of view and through multiple native and migrant voices, inspired in part by Ghermandi's own reading of Flaiano's novel and by Labanca's historical research, which she acknowledges in her 'Ringraziamenti', pp. 253–54.
27. I borrow the phrase from Fredric Jameson's essay, 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', in *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 1–54 (pp. 51–4) (first publ. as 'Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 146 (July–August, 1984), 54–92).
28. See 'La sfida al labirinto' in Italo Calvino, *Saggi 1945–1985*, ed. by Mario Barenghi, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), I, 105–23.
29. See Lucia Re, 'Calvino and the Value of Literature', *MLN*, 113 (1998), 121–37.
30. *Tempo di uccidere*, p. 242. In the first edition, the final page included this exchange between the protagonist and the Second Lieutenant, which was cut from the 1990 edition:
    'E suppongo', dissi fissandolo, 'che nessuno mi cercherà, *mai*'.
    'Ne sono certo', rispose. 'Nessuno ti cercherà. Siamo tutti innocenti'.
31. The best illustration of this forceful epic narrative may perhaps be found in *Il cammino degli eroi*, a 1936 'documentary' by Corrado D'Errico about the war in Ethiopia whose structure and tone are antithetical to *Tempo di uccidere* in every way even as they cover much the same ground and historical events.
32. See *Tempo di uccidere*, p. 129: 'Cè qualcosa di guasto in questo paese'.
33. The diary may be found in an appendix to the novel in *Opere scelte*, ed. by Longoni, pp. 1427–46.
34. Interview with Aldo Rosselli [1972], in *Opere: Scritti postumi*, ed. by Corti and Longoni p. 1240.
35. See Anna Longoni, '*Tempo di uccidere* e la narrazione frantumata: Il romanzo e l'altro Flaiano', in *Tempo di uccidere: Atti del convegno nazionale*, pp. 23–34; and Maria Corti, Introduction in Ennio Flaiano, *Opere: Scritti postumi*, pp. vii-xliii.
36. Flaiano, *Opere scelte*, p. 1427.
37. See Enzo Biagi, *1935 e dintorni* (Milan: Mondadori, 1983), pp. 58–61. On the sexualization of the Ethiopian campaign and the violence against native women, see Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, 'Italian Fascism's Ethiopian Conquest and the Dream of a Prescribed Sexuality', in *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe's Twentieth Century*, ed. by Dagmar Herzog (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 91–108.

38. My translation. On this song, see Letizia Argenteri, '*Faccetta nera, bell'abissina!* The Power of Fascist Political Propaganda', in *Shades of Black and White: Conflict and Collaboration between Two Communities*, ed. by Dan Ashyk, Fred Gardaphe and Anthony Julian Tamburri (Staten Island, NY: American Italian Historical Association, 1999), pp. 1–12. The song was written by Giuseppe Micheli initially in Roman dialect as a quasi-satirical, anti-colonial text. It was set to music in 1935 by Mario Ruccione and was subject to Fascist interventions and rewritings before becoming a kind of unofficial anthem of Fascist imperialism. It is often mistranslated to gloss over its ideological meaning.
39. Interracial conjugal relations and the practice of *madamato* officially became a crime in 1937 under Fascist law, though they remained a widespread practice even as the law effectively promoted racist actions and behaviour towards women became more brutal and included rape. See Giulia Barrera, *Dangerous Liaisons: Colonial Concubinage in Eritrea, 1890–1941* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996).
40. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *The Forms of Violence: Narrative in Assyrian Art and Modern Culture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985); Teresa de Lauretis, 'Desire in Narrative', in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 103–57.
41. Sergio Pautasso, Introduction, in Ennio Flaiano, *Tempo di uccidere* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1980), p. vii.
42. Gius Gargiulo, 'Hic non sunt leones: La Guerra d'Etiopia (1935–36) tra mito coloniale e coscienza di un errore in Ennio Flaiano', *Narrativa*, 14 (1998), 281–91.
43. Franco Trequardini, '*Tempo di uccidere* tra romanzo e favola', in *Tempo di uccidere: Atti del convegno nazionale*, p. 58.
44. Schneider, p. 116, claims that Mariam 'becomes his lover and savior' and that her murder is unintentional. In Derek Duncan's words, the Lieutenant simply 'has sex' with Mariam. Duncan, 'Italian Identity', in *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory*, ed. by Jacueline Andall and Derek Duncan (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 109.
45. Patrizia Palumbo, 'National Integrity and African Malaise in Ennio Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere*', *Forum Italicum* 36, no. 1 (2002), 53–68; Luciano Marrocu, in *Colonialism and National Identity*, ed. by Pado Bentella Farnetti and Cecilia Dau Novelli (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2015), notes in passing and without further comment that in *Tempo di uccidere* the Lieutenant and Miriam 'have sexual intercourse' that is 'not much different from rape' (p. 104). But Gabriele Proglio in his article 'Postcolonialismo italiano, strategie di fuga fra letteratura e realtà: Decostruzioni della violenza sulla donna (colonizzata) nei romanzi di Gabriella Ghermandi ed Ennio Flaiano', *Tempĕranter* 1, no. 2–3 (2010) pp. 49–63, which is a study of Gabriella Ghermandi's postcolonial rewriting and reversal of the scene in her novel *Regina di fiori di perle*, clearly states that, in Flaiano's text, Mariam is 'prima viene violentata, poi uccisa'.
46. Lucilla Sergiacomo, 'Il tema dell'inettitudine in *Tempo di uccidere*', in *Tempo di Uccidere: Atti del convegno nazionale*, pp. 35–55.
47. *Tempo di uccidere*, pp. 21–24.
48. Umberto Eco, 'Eternal Fascism: Fourteen Ways of Looking at a Blackshirt', *New York Review of Books*, 22 June 1995, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism/> [accessed 14 November 2017].
49. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978).