

**ALLA BASE DI OGNI ESPANSIONE, IL DESIDERIO  
SESSUALE. NEGOTIATING EXOTICISM AND COLONIAL  
CONQUEST IN ENNIO FLAIANO'S *TEMPO DI UCCIDERE***

**LEAH NASSON**  
(University of Cape Town)

**Sommario**

*La pubblicazione di *Tempo di uccidere* (1947) di Ennio Flaiano, un romanzo ambientato in Abissinia durante la cosiddetta guerra dei sette mesi (1935-1936), aprì lo spazio a un dibattito sia letterario sia storico sul tema che per l'autore è centrale: il colonialismo. Tuttavia gran parte della critica ha dedicato maggior attenzione alle implicazioni esistenziali del romanzo, in particolare al viaggio metafisico del protagonista, dal peccato verso la mai raggiunta assoluzione. Eppure non si può sottovalutare l'importanza del contesto bellico, sia per il protagonista del romanzo, sia per lo scrittore, il quale visse in prima persona gli orrori della conquista. L'articolo prende in esame il primo capitolo del romanzo, "La scorciatoia", nel quale confluiscono le opposizioni tematiche Esotismo/Europeismo, Uomo/Donna, Civiltà/Primitivismo, che rivelano la visione profondamente anticoloniale dell'autore.*

Dormiva, proprio come l'Africa, il sonno caldo e greve della decadenza, il sonno dei grandi imperi mancati che non sorgeranno finché il 'signore' non sarà sfinito dalla sua stessa immaginazione e le cose che inventerà non si rivolgeranno contro di lui. Povero 'signore'. Allora questa terra si troverà come sempre; e il sonno di costei apparirà la più logica risposta. (Flaiano, 1947:289)

The importance of the vision of colonial experience expressed in Ennio Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere* is often neglected within literary criticism, with emphasis usually falling on the existential significance

of the work as opposed to the historical context which forms its foundation. Still, given that the extent of Italy's colonial endeavours in Africa was certainly marginal when compared to the likes of Britain and France, it is not surprising that the 1935 Ethiopian war of conquest, *la Guerra dei Sette Mesi*, has been reduced to the equivalent of a footnote, while the philosophical implications of the protagonist's journey have occupied centre stage. However, in isolating the existential considerations of the novel from the conditions from which they emerge, the story is elevated to an ahistorical level and thus can be interpreted outside of colonial and postcolonial discourse. This is, no doubt, one of the strengths of Flaiano's work. Nevertheless, a glance at the opening chapter of the novel reveals a myriad of both archetypal and atypical features of exoticist attitudes towards the «other» which provide the framework for the development of the vision of colonialism in the remaining chapters. Given the limitations of this article and the potential scope of the research, I focus here on how the interaction between the anonymous protagonist and Mariam in the opening chapter, entitled *La scorciatoia*, acts as a crucible through which an ambivalent outlook on imperialism is distilled. In this chapter, we see the establishment and questioning of power relations between the coloniser and the colonised, the European and the «other», the virile man and the innocent woman, all of which come together to create a contested perspective of Italian colonialism.

It goes without saying that literary works are necessarily connected to the historical contexts in which they are both based and written, and the connection between *Tempo di uccidere* and the 1935-1936 Italian war of conquest in Ethiopia is no different. The colonial context does not simply act as a secondary stage, or a distant background over which the symbolic significance of the novel presides. Rather, the prevalent symbolism and the fluid boundaries between the fantastic, the imagined and the real, in transcending the historical reality, paradoxically succeed in creating a vision which is bound inexorably to the Italian war of conquest. Through historicising the work, the exoticist representations of the «other» may seem somewhat obvious. They are, in effect, borne out of an era in which little more could be expected of the average Italian soldier in *Africa*

*Oriente Italiano* than an attitude framed by imperialist fascist rhetoric of a «civilising» colonial expedition into the depths of the «Dark Continent». That which emerges as particularly interesting in Flaiano's novel, however, is the way in which the protagonist's perspective oscillates between the orthodox and the unexpected, revealing a somewhat ambiguous vision of colonialism, not strong enough to be defined as ideology but not faint enough to be ignored.

The connection between literature and history has long been established in academic criticism<sup>1</sup>, although the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* no doubt popularised the field, compelling literary studies to address the intersection of these two disciplines, forcing us «to question literary discourse in order to reveal its colonial genealogy and disclose other sources of knowledge and agency» (Prakash, 1995:209). Although the themes which emerge through the anonymous lieutenant's experience in Ethiopia are indeed universal in relevance and timeless in quality, there are a number of reasons for which it is equally important to reflect on the historical environment in which the action of the novel takes place, not least of which is the existence of *Aethiopia: Appunti per una canzonetta*, the diary upon which Flaiano's work is based. The literary evocations of the colonial landscape in *Tempo di uccidere*, manifested both through the attitudes of the protagonist as well as through the physical descriptions of his surroundings, are rooted in Flaiano's own experience as a lieutenant in Ethiopia between 13 November 1935 and 27 April 1936, an experience which is documented, through reflections and aphorisms, in *Aethiopia: Appunti per una canzonetta*.

The comprehensive analysis of Italo-Ethiopian war was largely neglected by Italian historical scholarship of the post-1945 era, and until relatively recently, dominated by histories written by ex-colonial officials or politicians who would certainly not have been quick to denounce the atrocities committed by the Fascist colonial regime. A shift in historiography, pioneered by the likes of Angelo Del Boca,

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<sup>1</sup> One only needs to think of the British journal, *Literature and History*, which has been circulating since 1975. It goes without saying that the reciprocal relationship between literature and history has long-established roots which span centuries of writing in a myriad of languages. I refer here not to the historical novel *per se*, but rather to the academic study of literature and history, popularised by the rise in "Cultural Studies" and Postcolonialism.

Alberto Sbacchi, Nicola Labanca and Giorgio Rochat, however, has allowed for a collective reimagination of Italian colonial experience. It is that reimagination which indicates a conscious rupturing of the pervasive myth of «Italiani brava gente» (Pickering-Iazzi, 2005:199) and instead encourages an honest engagement with the realities of Italian aggression in the Horn of Africa. It is within this framework, therefore, that the historical (and indeed thus literary) value of *Tempo di uccidere* can be truly understood.

On the evening of October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1935, Mussolini stood on the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia in Rome and announced with requisite militant fervour: «Gli italiani sono in questo momento raccolti nelle piazze di tutta Italia [...] Non è soltanto un esercito che tende verso i suoi obiettivi, ma è un popolo intero di quarantaquattro milioni di anime, contro il quale si tenta di consumare la più nera delle ingiustizie: quella di toglierci un pò di posto al sole.»<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there is a palpable disjuncture between Mussolini's evocation of images of a vast fertile land sowed with the seeds of future opulence, the «posto al sole» that had been denied the Italian people for decades, and the reality confronted by the Italian soldiers upon arrival. This reality is echoed by Flaiano in *Aethiopia: Appunti per una canzonetta*, «Osservando i terreni, incolti, due soldati pensano all'Italia. 'È poco fertile questa terra' dice uno. 'Poco fertile?' ribatte l'altro. 'Ma se si fanno due e persino tre raccolti di pietre all'anno!'» (290). The years of colonial propaganda had reached their ultimate expression, and the harsh realities of the impending conflict were certainly not tangible to the anonymous Italian soldier, as he knew very little of the geography, ethno-cultural practices and local vernaculars which awaited him (Dominioni, 2008:37). Propped up by popular support and nationalist fervour, the colonial adventure was to provide Mussolini with the optimal opportunity to appease the regime's propagandists, to reinforce the military superiority of Italy, to expand her empire and to capitalise on economic interests linked to the Italian-African interchange.

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<sup>2</sup> This speech was given on 2 October 1935, and is widely documented. The full text can be accessed in Mussolini, B. 1935. *Scritti e Discorsi di Benito Mussolini*. (Milano, Hoepli Editore):218-220.

Seven months later, on the very same balcony, il Duce announced to the nation: «L'Italia ha finalmente il suo Impero [...] Impero di pace perché l'Italia vuole la pace, per sé e per tutti, e si decide alla guerra soltanto quando vi è portata da imperiose incoercibili necessità di vita. Impero di civiltà e di umanità per tutte le popolazioni dell'Etiopia. È nella tradizione di Roma che, dopo aver vinto, associava i popoli al suo destino»<sup>3</sup>. It was certainly not an empire of peace, as thousands of Ethiopians bore testament, victims of the rapacious invasive tactics which notoriously included the use of illegal chemical weapons. The protagonist in *Tempo di uccidere* embodies the contradictions of this colonial war, is witness to these often inhumane practices of the Italian army, and while at times he represents the archetypal European soldier, his attitude towards the exotic «other» is often coloured by irony and self-doubt, discounting any interpretation of the work as pro-colonial. The novel, in reflecting the tragedy of one Italian soldier, reflects the tragedy of all the actors in the theatre of colonial war. Whether the indolent Italian doctor, the belligerent and corrupt army major or the forgotten *askari*, Flaiano questions and challenges our understanding of our own prejudices and assumptions, and undermines the very premises upon which the imperialist venture was founded.

In the opening chapter of the novel, much like Dante in *Inferno I*, the protagonist loses his way in a «selva oscura» (Simonetti, 1992:17) after taking a shortcut in search of a dentist. He comes across an Ethiopian woman washing herself at a pool of water, and while initially resistant, ultimately she succumbs to his sexual advances. One evening, he hears noises, sees a shadow and mistakes it for an unidentified animal. Scared, he shoots and severely injures the woman, whose name he correctly assumes to be Mariam, as «non poteva chiamarsi che Mariam (tutte si chiamano Mariam quaggiù)»(55)<sup>4</sup>. Unable to cope with her slow suffering, he kills the woman, buries her in a concealed grave, and embarks on a

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted from his speech on 9 maggio 1936, the birth of the Italian Empire.

<sup>4</sup> In reducing an entire population of women to the name «Mariam», the protagonist ultimately robs the female «other» of her individuality, while elevating the exotic encounter to a universal level.

psychological journey in search of absolution. Overcome by feelings of guilt and anger, the actions of the protagonist in the chapters which follow reveal a moral and emotional degradation, as though the forbidden physical encounter with «Dark Africa» had caused the Italian soldier to lose his ethical compass. Indeed, «la vittima della sua divorante paura di esser divorato non è l’Africa; in realtà egli è la vittima di se stesso» (Simonetti, 1992:16).

The first edition Signet translation of *Tempo di uccidere* (The Short Cut), translated by Stuart Hood and published in 1951, provides an optimal starting point from which to further explore the representation of the female other. Sold as a «haunting story of forbidden love», the cover shows a woman (interestingly enough, she resembles a European far more than she does an African, with gold earrings and flowing black hair), semi-nude, draped in a white sheet as she climbs out of an oasis. Surrounded by ferns and water lilies, the image clearly reflects the conflation of the exotic and the erotic, which finds its full expression in the opening chapter. The preface is written from a primitivist exotic perspective, evoking the notion of the sensuality and sexuality of the woman as being untouched by the trappings of the modern world, a type of prelapsarian world view which errs between admiration and condescension:

From this chance encounter between a bored soldier and an innocent native girl, at an isolated mountain pool, flared a brief and passionate romance that ended in murder! Terrified by his crime, the soldier flees [...] discovers too late, that the idyllic interlude has left him with a dreadful curse – a stigma which means desertion from the army, farewell to his bride – and death!<sup>5</sup>

Taken at face value, this English edition therefore captures the spirit of its times. Portrayed as a story of forbidden love and colonial conquest, it firmly places the work amongst the hundreds of others to emerge out of imperial experience, whether Chateaubriand or Loti, Conrad or Kipling. However, as is the case with the aforementioned

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<sup>5</sup> This is taken from the preface of the 1951 English translation, *The Short Cut*.

authors, Flaiano's novel cannot be reduced to such a simplistic interpretation. Its complexity lies not only with its existential considerations, but also with its depiction of colonial experience. Scratching beneath the surface of the first person narrator, the Italian lieutenant, there are two discernible voices which appear throughout the course of the novel. This explains the often incongruent portrayals of the exotic other, as it is through the opposition of these two voices and the way in which the narrator engages with his environment that the debate on the nature of colonialism emerges

Il protagonista rimane praticamente cieco all'essenza culturale dell'altro, dell'abissino colonizzato, mentre il narratore da una certa distanza culturale e temporale, nell'atto di valutare la propria esperienza passato, rivela una certa apertura alla differenza culturale, una curiosità e disponibilità verso il mondo del colonizzato che si traduce nell'atteggiamento ironico del narratore ogni volta che affiorano la superficialità di quest'ultimo e la impermeabilità al concetto dell'altro. (Orlandini, 1992:479)

The protagonist's first encounter with an Ethiopian woman is no doubt the most important, given that it is this episode which ignites the flame of sin and expiation which guides the rest of the novel. Lost in «quella sinistra boscaglia» (36), he comes across the woman bathing herself. This act, a banal daily activity, is elevated to the level of a «spettacolo» (37) and «giuoco» (37) for the soldier, «Poiché il giuoco non accennava a finire, accesi una sigaretta e intanto mi sarei riposato» (37), essentially allowing him to be a passive observer of an eroticised object. Here we see the archetypal motif of the *pastorella* coincide with the attribution of animalistic characteristics to the Ethiopian woman, «Era nuda e stava lavandosi a una delle pozze, accosciata come un buon animale domestico»(37). Undermining her understanding of humanity, the protagonist declares that «ella non dava all'esistenza il valore che le davo io, per lei tutto si sarebbe risolto nell'obbedirmi, sempre [...] Qualcosa di più di un albero qualcosa di meno di una donna» (59). Confusing her for an animal

and shooting her, he smells the «fetore selvaggio della sua pelliccia» (60), hears the «lamento selvaggio» (60) and the «urlo della bestia che avevo ferito a morte» (62). Not only does the attribution of animal-like characteristics to the Ethiopian woman result in the patent dehumanisation of the «other» so common in colonial contexts, but it also reinforces a relationship of subservience and servitude strong enough to withstand even the certitude of death.

However, although Mariam is primarily depicted as more animal than human, it is worth noting here that she is described as having European features, «Era di pelle molto chiara [...] la dominazione portoghese ha schiarito la pelle e i desideri delle donne che si incontrano» (37). There are two aspects of exoticist-colonial discourse evident in the citation. Firstly, the depiction of the woman as having some European features serves to familiarise the «other» to both the protagonist and the reader, somehow rendering the erotic desires of the soldier more acceptable and counteracting the ubiquitous notion of «Africa's rabid sexuality». Secondly, we see the idea of European influence in the region having successfully reigned in the previously «uncontrollable» sexual desires of the Ethiopian women, whose sexuality is intricately connected to their animal nature (Todorov, 1993:320). This attitude towards women as predatory sexual beings and threats to the nation's masculinity has a firm foundation in fascist ideology, as Ruth Ben-Ghiat asserts, and finds expression in other forms of cultural works under Fascism

[...] many of the issues that characterise colonial culture, such as the conflation of sexual and geographic conquest in the trope of reclaiming the soil, have their roots in ideology and social policy of earlier years. In a sense, Ethiopia became a new forum for the expression of fantasies and fears that were central to the fascist imaginary from the start of the regime. (Ben-Ghiat, 1996:115)

In essence, the interaction between the lieutenant and Mariam does not differ substantially from any other colonial encounter. Although it does not involve the exchange of gunfire, the isolated area of the

plateau is transformed into a metaphorical battlefield, in which the power of the coloniser is asserted over that of the colonised. This link is patently clear with the use of words such as «lotta», «difesa» and «dominio» to describe the interaction between the European and the other. Power is undeniably the fundamental feature of colonialism, whether in the form of an asserted masculinity or through the conquest of a piece of land, and in this chapter it is through the negotiation of this power that a critique of «prestigio colonialistico» (Flaiano, 1972:1210) becomes evident. Although acutely aware of his own position in the social hierarchy, the protagonist seems to question it, appearing conscious of the artificial nature of his superiority. The fact that «signore» is always written in inverted commas implies a sense of irony and doubt in the mind of lieutenant as to the value of this term, «Ero un 'signore', potevo esprimere anche la mia volontà» (39) Nevertheless, the second narrative voice is largely subdued and the prevailing attitude adopted by the lieutenant is one of the archetypal European coloniser, encapsulated by the now notorious Fascist song *Faccetta Nera*<sup>6</sup> and reiterated in one of the entries in *Aethiopia: Appunti per una canzonetta*, under the appropriate title «Penetrazione culturale»:

Chiedo a un soldato un pezzo di carta, per un appunto  
[...] Leggo lo scritto: *sciala'bot, mitri* (gli organi sessuali  
in tigrino) e via di questo passo. Il soldato, confuso,  
afferma che, in fondo, sono le parole che hanno più  
probabilità delle altre di essere usate [...] Penso a  
tutti i manuali di conversazione che ancora si stampano  
a Lipsia. (Flaiano, 1947:296)

Far from being liberated by the Italian soldier, the woman's resistance to his advances, «la sua lenta e tenace resistenza» (43) is cast aside with a sense of disbelief, «Allora, quale ostacolo si opponeva ai miei desideri abbastanza giusti? Su, sorella, coraggio, la scena biblica è durata anche troppo» (43) These purportedly just desires reveal a

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<sup>6</sup> "Faccetta nera , piccola abissina/ ti porteremo a Roma, liberata/Dal Nostro unico tu sarai baciata/Sarai in Camicia Nera pure te".

fluid moral paradigm into which the European places himself as a benign subject, while the Ethiopian woman effectively acts as a vehicle of his own desires. Typical of the exotic literary trope, the woman (and indeed the other Ethiopian characters in the novel) are present only in their respective capacities to complement the story of the protagonist, as opposed to being presented as characters themselves, with their own histories and social agency (Derobertis, 2008:4 ). As Todorov notes,

The woman is foremost among his objects of perception. The male traveller is active: one day he arrives, another day he leaves. Between those two events we learn about his experiences and sensations. The woman and the foreign country (the woman because she is a foreigner, the country because it is eroticised) both allow themselves to be desired, governed, and abandoned; at no point do we see the world through their eyes [...] The man, for the same part, enjoys the same superiority with respect to women that the European enjoys with respect to other peoples. (Todorov, 1993:315)

In initially refusing to succumb to the lieutenant's desires, Mariam essentially rejects all that he represents: most pertinently the Italian coloniser. Although clearly perplexed and frustrated by this, the protagonist seems to be conscious of (or even empathetic towards) the reasons for the woman's apparent resentment, although this realisation does not dissuade him from pursuing her further «Non era certo la paura di essere violata, ma quella più profonda della schiava che cede al padrone. Doveva pagare la sua parte per la guerra che i suoi uomini stavano perdendo» (43). This attitude, while typical of colonial approaches, once again seems to be reflected here somewhat ironically, giving way to a disjuncture between his assertion of his position as a «signore» and his awareness of what being a «signore» means for the other. He sees in her «l'odio per i 'signori' che avevano distrutto la sua capanna, ucciso il suo uomo» (43), and shows unexpected insight into colonial psychology: «forse, come tutti i soldati di questo mondo, presumevo di conoscere la psicologia dei

conquistati. Mi sentivo troppo diverso da loro, per ammettere che avessero altri pensieri oltre quelli suggeriti dalla più elementare natura» (43). Much like the dilemma faced by Musoduro in Marinetti's *Luci Veloci*, the protagonist is faced with an irreconcilable predicament, reflective of the inescapable ambivalence of exoticist desire: an unavoidable complicity with the historical process of colonialism and an impossible desire for the exotic as a reservoir of heroic individuality (Sartini-Blum, 2005:143).

While the power balance between the Fascist male and his obsequious female counterpart on the homefront is rooted in traditional notions of masculine superiority, the reassertion of masculinity is rendered even more pertinent in the colonial context, as it ties in with the relationship of coloniser/colonised and European/Other. The African landscape, much like the American West, is portrayed as an open space in which «true» masculinity can be asserted

[...] il vantaggio di sentirsi in una terra non contaminata:  
idea che ha pure il suo fascino sugli uomini costretti  
nella loro terra a servirsi del tram quattro volte al giorno.  
Qui sei un uomo, un erede del vincitore del dinosauro.  
Pensi, ti muovi, uccidi, mangi l'animale che un'ora prima  
hai sorpreso vivo, fai un breve segno e sei obbedito.  
Passi inerme e la natura stessa ti teme. (54)

This idea of an uncontaminated land is central to the elements of exoticism we see in *La scorciatoia*, as the untouched expanse is directly associated with the femininity of the Ethiopian other. Much like the colonisers' self-ordained right to assert their masculinity and power onto the Ethiopian landscape, the lieutenant imposes his «desideri abbastanza giusti» (43) onto Mariam. The colonial territory is thus an exotic retreat for the modern fascist subject, a space in which heroic individuality which is elusive in the European state, can be pursued. Herein lies the paradox in merging fascist ideology with exoticist literature: «the doomed attempt to salvage the individual by displacing it to a land beyond the reach of modernity» (Sartini-Blum: 138).

Referring again to the preface to the 1950 Signet translation of *Tempo di uccidere*, Ethiopia is described as «[...] that hyena-haunted, crocodile-infested, sinister country»<sup>7</sup>, a perspective that certainly differs greatly from the Fascist promises of miles of bountiful fertile land and a depiction that reflects, albeit not exclusively, the imagery portrayed both in *Tempo di uccidere* and *Aethiopia: Appunti per una canzonetta*. In the novel, the surreal intersects with the lugubrious, with trees which seem to be constructed out of *papier maché* or plants which resemble stuffed animals being placed alongside repeated references to the melancholy of the environment, the «noia» from which no-one can escape. Orlandini notes that

L’Africa di Flaiano è meno quella dei proconsoli e dei mercanti romani dell’Africa della colonia italiana [...]La percezione del paesaggio da parte del tenente risente quindi anche l’anticolonialismo dell’autore secondo cui in Etiopia gli’italiani non stanno portando alcun bene. Al di là del Mediterraneo questo tenente ha trovato una terra triste e morente ed egli ne appresenta la rigogliosità com immagini di morte. (Orlandini, 1992:481)

Flaiano establishes a slow, melancholic atmosphere, a ubiquitous «noia» which is as oppressive as the «caldo insopportabile» of the Ethiopian landscape, while extensive repetition of images serves to echo the stifling mood of the novel. In effect, this oppressive atmosphere of the soldier’s surroundings is thus also personified in the figure of the Ethiopian woman who, more than just being an extension of the landscape which surrounds her, is ultimately the embodiment of it.

The depiction of Mariam alternates between a romanticisation of her pure, untainted innocence («la guardavo e la purezza del suo sguardo rimaneva intatta», 41) and disdain for her lack of cultural and intellectual modernity, questioning «i suoi pensieri (se ne aveva)» (43). This echoes the exoticism in Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème*, with the narrator saying of his exotic Japanese object, «What thoughts

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<sup>7</sup> This is taken from the preface of the 1951 English translation, *The Short Cut*.

can be running through that little brain? [...] It is a hundred to one that she has no thoughts whatsoever» (Todorov, 1993:316). Enconced in this perspective is the contested opposition of European «civilisation» and exotic «barbarity», with Flaiano's protagonist often longing for the modernity which proves inexistent in the barren, timeless landscape of the Ethiopian plateau. Mariam herself is the intersection between these two worlds, as she is described as being «così nobile nel manto romano, ma a piedi nudi» (49). She is «vestita ancora come le donne romane arrivate laggiù, gli occhi di lei mi guardavano da duemila anni» (42) and, like most of the other Ethiopian characters in the novel, she has no sense of time. Indeed, it is not perchance that the lieutenant's watch, an image which is central to the thematic development of the novel, stops functioning in this first chapter. A concept of time is a symbol of modernity, and the encounter with Mariam thus happens *outside* of time (Orlandini, 1992:485), rendering it eternal and, at the same time, «al tempo assassino dei conquistatori, si oppone il tempo immortale delle conquistate: il loro incontro significa dunque una morte reciproca, data in modo diverso» (Simonetti, 1992:18) This reciprocal death, literal for the woman and figurative for the lieutenant, transcends the rigid constraints of power relations and ultimately binds the coloniser to the colonised by a common fate: as victims of a system beyond their control.

Mariam and the landscape which surrounds her represent for the protagonist a return to man's natural state, prior to the corruption of modern society. This is reinforced through extensive biblical references, contained not only in the notion of sin and expiation, but also in the erotic-exotic «scena biblica» (43). An explicit connection is made between the soldier and the exotic Mariam and Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, «Respingeva le mie mani perché così Eva aveva respinto le mani di Adamo, in una boscaglia simile a quella» (43), evoking the notion of original sin and essentially equating the landscape and its people with the idea of a land before time, a sort of premodern idyll. A central topos of exoticism, the expansive desert, replaced by a «selva boscaglia» in *Tempo di uccidere*, is portrayed as the ideal retreat for the heroic (or in the case of the protagonist, anti-heroic) subject, who is then able to negotiate his identity beyond the

homogenising forces of both society and the army (Sartini-Blum, 2005:145). However, this is not an unchanging exotic Eden, and the physical environment in which the protagonist finds himself is imposed onto Mariam, who moves «con una lentezza di una donna matura, che potevo attribuire soltanto alla noia di quella calda giornata» (38), and is «animata da un sangue denso, un sangue avvezzo alla malinconia di questa terra» (38). Thus, even though the exotic encounter provides the lieutenant with some respite from his toothache and from the tedium of the African landscape, not even the object of his desires is able to escape the oppression of the atmosphere. Indeed, in trying to assuage his sense of betrayal, the lieutenant declares that his liaison with Mariam «non era un tradimento, ma un omaggio alla lunga noia dell'esilio» (42).

The protagonist's romanticisation of the premodern idyll is, like most of the other assertions in the novel, contested. The internal conflict, which is produced by this continuous oscillation between revering and reviling the exotic, accentuates narrative tension and highlights the infinite contradictions inherent in the colonial experience. The confrontation of Western «civilisation» with African «barbarity» is reflected in the split narrative voice, with the empathy showed by the narrator interrupted by the lieutenant's assumption that «una terra 'incivilizzata' non può [...] che essere abitata da esseri inferiori», even though the two are effectively the same person (Orlandini, 1992:481) Shortly after the images of a biblical paradise, in one of the most pertinent passages of this opening chapter, the lieutenant declares:

Perché non capivo quella gente? Erano tristi animali, invecchiati in una terra senza uscita, erano grandi camminatori, grandi conoscitori di scorciatoia, forse saggi, ma antichi e incolti. Nessun di loro si faceva la barba ascoltando le prime notizie, né le loro colazioni erano rese più eccitanti dai fogli ancora freschi di inchiostro. Potevano vivere conoscendo soltanto cento parole. Da una parte il Bello e il Buono, dall'altra il Brutto e il Cattivo. (44)

Here, the opposition of civilisation, with newspapers and shaving representing European progression, with the «premodern simplicity» of the Ethiopians is particularly discernible. However, not all the native inhabitants are described along these lines, and it is at this juncture that the focus moves away for a moment from *La scorciatoia* to the fifth chapter, *Il dado e la vite*, in which we see the appearance of a second Mariam, who has sought to assimilate the adornments of Western culture into her being.

Quite unlike the Mariam of the plateau, the «noble savage» of the wilderness, Mariam in the city port of Massaua is an «indigena evoluta» (175), with that ultimate emblem of modernity – a concept of time. Here the image of the *pastorella*, the innocent woman washing herself in nature, is transposed onto an urban setting. Once again the opening image of the woman is that of her washing herself, although this time in a house, and although embodied in the two Mariams is the contrast between primitivism and civility, both women share a sentiment common to their environment: «Ma vedevo i suoi occhi perdersi nello sforzo di quella *noia*» (169, emphasis added), «aveva il caldo e la *noia* di Massaua nelle ossa» (176). A sense of the absurd emerges in the description of the urbanised Mariam, who, despite being «un'indigena evoluta, [la quale] leggeva novelle [...] teneva il giornale sul comodino e lo sfogliava» (175) cannot escape the condescending tone of the protagonist. While the «primitive Mariam» is associated with animals, evoking the motif common to colonial literature of the «noble savage», the «evolved» Mariam is described as a child, whose attempts to adopt the panoply of Western society are essentially ridiculed by the protagonist «Il suo volto era ancora quello ingenuo e chiuso di una donna dell'interno. I cosmetici mettevano solo un velo puerile sul suo viso; mi ricordava certe bambine che si truccano per la prima volta, ansiose di affermare la loro pubertà e di sfidare commenti» (174). He does not, therefore, admire the «indigena evoluta», but rather displays a patronising attitude towards her. She is presented as the antithesis of her «exotic» counterpart, and indeed her identity is affirmed not by what she is, but what she is not.

Povera Mariam. Aveva imparato a leggere, andava al cinema, non si lavava più nelle pozze dei torrenti secchi,

non rifiutava monete d'argento, il villaggio era ormai dimenticato. Poteva restar nuda non per estrema innocenza, ma perché aveva superato tutti i pudori [...] Quella sua vestaglia veniva da Napoli, il suo giornale si stampava a Milano. Ma io, da lei non volevo essere toccato. (177)

The veneration of the «exotic» Mariam is not necessarily surprising if one considers the precepts of primitivist exotic discourse. Perpetuating the myth of the innocent other, she represents for the protagonist a purity that has been lost in the «evolved» Mariam, whose attempts at assimilation seem to be futile, almost absurd. This sentiment is echoed by Flaiano himself in 1935: «l'uso che gli indigeni fanno di certe nostre parole è singolare [...] ogni loro desiderio assume un tono esagerato, falso» (294). Herein lies one of the many tragic absurdities of colonialism: the exportation and imposition of a system of cultural rites based solely on the assumption of European superiority, under the guise of «liberating» and «civilising» the native population. Having personally experienced the mendacity which lay at the foundation of the Italian colonial mission, Flaiano said in 1972: «Infatti io ho visto come queste persone che noi andavamo a 'liberare' erano invece oppresse e spaventate dal nostro arrivo. La nostra funzione era soltanto una bassa funzione di prestigio colonialistico, ormai in ritardo» (1210). This strong personal conviction, combined with his entries in *Aethiopia: Appunti per una canzonetta*, is certainly enough to suggest that the author wrote *Tempo di uccidere* with a clear vision in mind. While there is little of a rigid political stance (for political judgement is primarily replaced by moral judgement in the novel), when one looks the portrayal of the colonial experience in the context of Flaiano's own views, the ambivalence of the novel can easily be interpreted as veiled anticolonialism.

While the nature of this article has only allowed for a relatively brief glance at the examples of exoticism in the opening chapter of the work, the evocation of the colonial context in *Tempo di uccidere* and *Aethiopia: Appunti per una canzonetta* remains an area deserving of more extensive critical exploration. Ultimately, it is through the

exotic encounter in the isolated landscape of the plateau that the extensive history of colonial attitudes and characters are distilled in the figure of the lieutenant. He is the ethnocentric and arrogant purveyor of Western thought, the exoticist traveller in search of an authentic experience as a retreat from the corrosive forces of modernity, and the colonising soldier seeking to assert his masculinity (Sartini-Blum, 2005:157). *Tempo di uccidere* provides us with rare insight into the nature of Italian occupation in Africa, beyond the diaries of the officials or Fascist propaganda. As one of the few works of fiction to emerge out of the 1935-1936 'guerra dei sette mesi', the novel is of great literary and historical value, in its capacity to accurately represent attitudes as well as to criticise the morality of the colonial enterprise, revealing a remarkably astute analysis of European imperialism. In closing, perhaps it is the words of the colonial Italian doctor, which best encapsulate Flaiano's vision: «l'imperialismo, come la lebbra, si cura soltanto con la morte» (56).

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