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“L’imperialismo, come la lebbra, si cura con la morte”

Intersecting Narratives in Ennio Flaiano’s *Tempo di uccidere*.

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Arts in Italian

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Leah Nasson

Date: 1 May 2012

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***Translation of title: “Imperialism, like leprosy, is cured by death”. Intersecting narratives in Ennio Flaiano’s *Tempo di uccidere*.**

Abstract

In 1947 Ennio Flaiano published what was to become his only full-length novel, *Tempo di uccidere*. Set in Abyssinia during the 1935-1936 Italo-Ethiopian War, it is a work that, notwithstanding its ostensibly “realist” subject matter, displays a palpable dissonance with the coeval cultural and literary landscape of post-war Italy, then dominated by the age of neorealism. With *Tempo di uccidere*, Flaiano chooses to counter the largely nationally inward, materialist gaze of his contemporary authors by shifting the focus to a socio-political and cultural environment that would have proved largely foreign to the majority of his readers. However, the apparent unfamiliarity of Abyssinian plateau does not prevent the emergence of historical and philosophical themes that resonate far beyond the geopolitical and socio-cultural limitations of the Northeast African frontier.

The primary aim of this MA dissertation is to explore - and to critically engage with – the two identifiable narratives that frame the interpretation of the novel. On one hand, the colonial sphere of war gives rise to a socio-historical narrative, in which one arguably sees the emergence of critique of Fascism, of Western imperialism, and on a broader level, of the dangers of political doctrine and ideology. In this manner, the novel can be considered particularly “forward-thinking” in its attempt to question and to undermine the assumptions that formed the heart of the colonial enterprise, and to represent the frequently brutal and corrupt realities of the Italian presence in the Horn of Africa. On the other hand, in recounting the story of an inept Italian lieutenant descending further into an ethical, existential and psychological abyss, Flaiano also recalls the literary themes of the *Primo Novecento*, hence cementing the post-1945 novel in a pre-1939 context. Themes of ineptitude, disease and *ennui* converge to reveal what we could call the author’s “literary nostalgia” - his retrospective philosophical perspective, which forms the foundation of the ontological narrative in *Tempo di uccidere*. In exploring key elements of these principal intersecting narratives through the lens of both historiography and textual analysis, this thesis attempts to shed more light on a novel that, for the most part, has existed on the fringe of the 20th century Italian literary canon.

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Chapter One

“L’intellettuale immune da cinismo e ubriacature ideologiche, il grande passeggiatore tra i generi” (Gambacorta, 2010: 29).

Introduction

1. Introduction

“Noi non sappiamo chi siamo, noi siamo dei passeggeri senza bagagli, nasciamo soli e moriamo soli [...] Io forse non ero di quest’epoca, non sono di quest’epoca. Forse appartengo a un altro mondo [...] È probabile che io sia un antico romano che sta qui ancora, dimenticato dalla storia, a scrivere le cose che molte hanno scritto meglio di me.”

Ennio Flaiano, as cited in Corti, 2010: 1327.

A reticent chameleon with a predilection for nicotine, a Major with a less than exemplary relationship with the law, an old *askari*¹, a woman who fears crocodiles, an indolent yet judicious doctor, and a lieutenant with a severely inadequate sense of direction: these characters are but a few of the threads with which Flaiano weaves the fabric of his only full-length novel, *Tempo di uccidere*. This novel, commissioned by Leo Longanesi and published in 1947, won the inaugural Premio Strega, only to be then largely consigned to oblivion within the context of the post-1945 Italian literary canon. A glance at literary anthologies of the *Novecento* reveals a tendency within scholarship either to ignore or to pay only fleeting critical attention to this work, preferring to focus on the art for which the author is more renowned: screenwriting, with Flaiano having collaborated with Fellini on the films *La Dolce Vita* and *8½*, amongst others². It is the contention of this thesis, however, that *Tempo di uccidere* requires further critical examination. A complex narrative voice, a retrospective thematic gaze and an ambiguous socio-historical perspective converge to reveal a defined, universal vision of that which is often deemed to be indefinable: namely, the human condition.

Undermining the precepts upon which a presumed notion of an objective, knowable reality is based, *Tempo di uccidere* calls into question the epistemological assumptions of certainty that characterised the Positivist imagination of existence during the 19th century. The ideas of the alienation of the individual, of a fractured self and a fluid reality are, of course, by no means to be considered original in 1947, given the literary precedents of the late 19th and early 20th centuries³. Moreover, although the ontological narrative can be interpreted as “anachronistic” in the late 1940s, drawing on Modernist themes of the turn of the century, it is worth noting that existentialist authors remained prominent beyond the northeastern frontier of the peninsula in France. Camus, for example, published *L’étranger* in 1942 and *La peste* in 1947, while Sartre published his seminal

¹ African, specifically East African, soldier, in the service of a European (here Italian) power.

² It is somewhat ironic, then, that one of the attempts to grapple with *Tempo di uccidere* was rooted in the cinematographic tradition, with Nicolas Cage starring in a 1989 filmic adaptation entitled “A Time to Kill”, a film which is no more illustrious than his more recent “Hungry Rabbit Jumps” or “Trapped in Paradise”.

³ Svevo, Musil, Pirandello et al.

opus *Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology* in 1943⁴. In Italy, however, literature of the post-Second World War era was characterised by the liberal idealism of the neorealist movement. Coupled with the patent symbolic value of the novel and its existentialist foundation, the presence of the surreal and the absurd in *Tempo di uccidere* illustrates a conscious rupturing with this predominant coeval discourse. It is for this reason, therefore, that the novel can be understood as existing outside of, or parallel to, the post-Second World War Italian literary milieu.

Although, on the surface, the theatre of the Italo-Ethiopian War is a concrete historical event, the author transforms the literal experience of the Italian colonial lieutenant into a metaphorical journey into the realm of human error, disease, ineptitude and ontological uncertainty (Longoni, as cited in Flaiano, 2008: 8). Thus, as Vito Moretti writes in *Tempo di uccidere e la critica*, the apparent realism of the historical context is quickly transformed into a metaphysical reality, although this is not to imply that the choice of the African colonial setting is insignificant or irrelevant. On the contrary, it is because of this very geopolitical and historically seminal environment, so distant from the popular imagination of his compatriots, that Flaiano is able to create a narrative that is, ironically, firmly rooted in the realities of post-war Italian society:

Enzo Siciliano aveva giustamente osservato che [...] ‘il realismo accertabile a prima vista si traduce in metafisica. Il giovane protagonista uccide perché ad uccidere non è lui, ma qualcosa che lo domina e lo fa agire’; per questa ragione Flaiano scriveva il libro di una generazione che non riusciva a prendere possesso della forza morale di cui si sentiva investita (Moretti, 1994: 114).

The protagonist’s descent into a moral and psychological void can hence be interpreted on an allegorical level. Underscoring the inability of man to control fate and to assuage the questions of his conscience and consciousness, the protagonist is essentially stripped of that which Flaiano implies are the myths and illusions of a determinable existence. Ultimately it is doubt, not certainty, which is the overriding sentiment that prevails through the complex layers of the text, catapulting the reader into the opaque and evanescent areas of human experience.

The existentialist narrative in *Tempo di uccidere* has by and large occupied prime position in literary criticism and interpretations of the novel in recent decades. Indeed, one can certainly argue that the philosophical foundation of the novel - its intrinsic symbolic value - is the principal feature of the work. However, it would be somewhat myopic to ignore the socio-historical context in which the action of the plot occurs. Although, as established, the contextual elements of the historical

⁴ Important to remember here is that one could argue that Italian authors such as Svevo, Pirandello and Michelstaedter can be considered existentialist *ante litteram*, insofar as they prefigure the Existentialists of the post-1945 epoch.

event are often superseded by the philosophical implications of the experience of the individual, there is a salient thread of socio-political commentary that emerges through the narrative. One of a rare group of works to be set during the 1935 Italo-Ethiopian War, it is clear that the particularity of its thematic foundation is not restricted to its retrospective ontological gaze. The lieutenant, while often supercilious, at times demonstrates an enlightened understanding of what can be seen as the callous futility of the colonial endeavour. Demonstrating sporadic compassion for the Abyssinian cause, his character – although representing an archetypal Italian soldier – also becomes the mouthpiece through which an ambivalent, ambiguous or even dissenting attitude towards colonialism is conveyed. Influenced by Flaiano’s own experience of fighting during the *Guerra di sette mesi*, this “anti-colonialism” is framed by the conspicuous disillusionment with the imperial cause evident in his diary, *Aethiopia: Appunti per una canzonetta*.

Thus, we now turn our attention to the title of this thesis: “*L'imperialismo, come la lebbra, si cura con la morte*: Intersecting narratives in Ennio Flaiano’s *Tempo di uccidere*”. The aphorism, recounted to the lieutenant by the corpulent army doctor in their central encounter, not only encapsulates but also effectively unites, in one sentence, the seemingly disparate ontological and socio-historical interpretations of the text. Leprosy, an “exotic” disease transmitted from the colonised to coloniser, is also the objective correlative of the lieutenant’s internal state of turmoil (a theme which is addressed in Chapter Six, *The Body as a Canvas for Change*). Moreover, imperialism, far from being categorically portrayed as a magnanimous means of exporting so-called “civilisation”, is repeatedly exposed as a disingenuous vehicle of furthering social and political deceit. The doctor’s portentous conclusion to both ills, however, need not imply a physical death. Rather, one could argue that on a symbolic level, the death of which the doctor speaks is the death of individual or collective illusions: the illusion of racial, political or cultural superiority, the illusion of “civilisation”, the illusion of moral, philosophical and psychological certainty, and the illusion of reality. As Flaiano himself once wrote, “La realtà è quella che noi riusciamo a far passare per tale” (Quarantotto, 1994: 69).

This thesis aims to explore some of the principal components of these two primary narratives and to assess the way in which these elements materialise in the text. Chapter Two examines the socio-historical foundation of the novel, first looking at the nature of Italian colonialism and historiography related to this period, and then at the idea of the exotic. Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six focus on the ontological narrative in *Tempo di uccidere*, with Chapter Three taking the form of an essay looking at 19th and 20th century literary precedents: the figurative architecture of the philosophical themes in the novel. Subsequently, in Chapters Four and Five the focus turns to the

development of the theme of ineptitude, looking at the fractured nature of the narrative voice, the lieutenant's relationship with Mariam and his wife, and the weak/strong opposition which fuels the feelings of marginalisation and difference in the Italian "inetto". Lastly, before the conclusion, the penultimate chapter explores the theme of disease, interpreting it *alla Svevo* as a physical manifestation of a *forma mentis*.

Just as there are two central narratives which intersect in the novel, so there are two intertwined lines of argument which have guided the interpretation in this thesis. The first, founded in the socio-historical context, asserts that the attitude towards the colonial enterprise, and towards the subjects themselves, can in fact be interpreted as "ideologically enlightened". The protagonist at times slips into imperious behaviour which is typical of the colonial literary trope. However, he also demonstrates an acute understanding of the false precepts which underpinned the justification for the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, and indeed for European colonialism at large. In choosing to shy away from a glorification of the Italian colonial project through fiction, Flaiano is particularly forward-thinking. In fact, in both fiction and non-fiction alike, openly honest portrayals of the nature of the 1935-1936 Italian invasion of Abyssinia remained scarce until significantly later on in the 20th century. In publishing a novel in 1947 in which the self-made victim of moral and social decay is not the oppressed but the oppressor, the author inverts the traditional structures of colonialist writing. Equally significant is the fact that he does not fall into the one-dimensional trap of being didactic, adopting an overtly moralistic stance and hence showing little understanding of the plight faced both by the Italian soldier (many of whom had very different expectations of "exotic Africa"), and by the subjugated Abyssinian population. The weight of responsibility for this moral degeneration, of which the lieutenant himself is a personification, is not placed on the shoulders of the idealistic young men drunk on the optimistic and bellicose rhetoric of Mussolini's regime. Instead, the author uses the character of an officer, the Major, as his principal conduit for representing the unscrupulous colonial enterprise.

This first line of argument, therefore, stems from looking at the Africa of Flaiano, or more specifically, at the Abyssinia of Flaiano. The imagination of the country and the conflict in both his novel and his diary differs markedly from that of his famous conservative contemporary, Indro Montanelli, for whom the conquest was an opportunity to assert individual and collective greatness. Flaiano's East Africa is filled with iniquity: a hostile, melancholic and arid landscape which proves threatening to the anonymous lieutenant. It is, nevertheless, also a *locus mentalis*, a landscape onto which one sees the projection of a longing for a civilisation still unscathed by the trappings of industrialisation and modernity of Western Europe. While this is an idea which is deeply entrenched

in the long-established “Eurocentric” tradition of exoticist literature, the novel needs to be historicised. Although clearly problematic, the exoticism in *Tempo di uccidere* is a product of a distinct historical era. Thus, it would be both naïve and inaccurate to impose a late 20th and early 21st century perspective on a novel published over fifty years ago. Nonetheless, it is evident that in the socio-historical narrative there lie a number of contradictory attitudes towards the “other” and towards the imperial venture. The first section of this thesis is dedicated to exploring these attitudes and to assessing the extent to which one can discern a coherent socio-political or historical stance on Italian colonialism in the novel.

If one considers the socio-historical narrative in *Tempo di uccidere* “progressive” within the context of the immediate post-1945 epoch, then for some the inverse may prove true when looking at the second line of argument: that of the philosophical narrative. Rather than “regressive”, itself often construed as a pejorative term, it would perhaps be more appropriate to refer to Flaiano’s philosophical and literary gaze as “retrospective”, relying for the most part on Modernist themes. In the story of the anonymous lieutenant, we encounter, amongst others, echoes of Conrad⁵, Svevo, Mann, Dostoevsky, and Camus. While one cannot categorically ascertain whether Flaiano was directly influenced by this diverse collection of authors, there are various thematic indications in the text which recall the malaise in Mann, the alienation in Camus, the ineptitude in Svevo, the weight of conscience in Dostoevsky, or the pernicious influence of colonial Africa on the individual that we see in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. When we look specifically at the history of Italian literature, the philosophical themes in Flaiano echo those of the likes of Svevo, Pirandello and Tozzi, for whom notions of the “inetto”, the fragmentation and the alienation of the self, and the unknowability of reality are significant facets of their literary vision. It is for this reason that one can speak of a certain “literary nostalgia” in the ontological foundation of Flaiano’s *Tempo di uccidere*. It is a nostalgia, to be clear, which is more specific to the Italian tradition than it is a reflection of the wider spectrum of Western European literature. This is highlighted by the fact that the same decade that saw the publication of Camus’s two seminal existentialist works⁶ was also witness to the nationally self-reflective, materialist gaze that characterised Italian neorealism. As already established, Flaiano’s counter-cultural, acutely critical and arguably nihilistic perspective in *Tempo di uccidere*, is clearly not imbued with the liberal idealism of his neorealist Italian contemporaries.

⁵ Conrad, however, was writing on the back of a brutally oppressive yet successful colonial conquest. Flaiano, on the other hand, published this novel after the fall of the limited Italian Empire, an imperial aegis which by no stretch of the imagination can be compared to that of Britain, France or Belgium, for example.

⁶ *L'étranger* (1942) and *La peste* (1947).

Tempo di uccidere is a novel which does not lend itself to a monolithic analysis. As a consequence, a single interpretative framework makes way for a more hermeneutic approach, which has allowed for an investigation into the multiple layers of meaning and into the interplay between text and historical context. A methodology grounded in narrative comparison has been employed for the literary and philosophical components of the analysis, while the exploration of Italian colonialism is heavily influenced by the works of Angelo Del Boca, Nicola Labanca and Giorgio Rochat *et al.* It is not, therefore, a historiographical approach that is framed by the revisionism of the influential 20th century Italian historian, Renzo De Felice⁷, and his contemporary school of thought. The methodology of the study, therefore, draws from a variety of fields of expertise, reflecting at its core the myriad avenues of interpretation that can be applied to Flaiano's novel.

Throughout the course of this thesis, present-day Ethiopia is referred to as Abyssinia in order to stay true to the historical record, although the war of conquest is referred to as the Italo-Ethiopian War as is accepted by current historiography. "Fascism" and "Fascist" are capitalised when used as proper nouns, but "fascist" remains in lower case when used as an adjective. All variations of this word refer specifically to the form that this political system adopted under Mussolini's regime. Citations in Italian have been kept in their original language, while all other citations have been provided in English. To avoid repetition, the protagonist is referred to as both "the protagonist", the "Italian lieutenant" and, at times, as the "first-person narrator". In addition, published as an appendix to the 2008 Rizzoli edition of *Tempo di uccidere*, citations from *Aethiopia: Appunti per una canzonetta* are differentiated from those from the novel by means of a full reference, as opposed to a page number. For example, an extract from *Aethiopia* is cited as (Flaiano, 2008: 300), while an extract from *Tempo di uccidere* is indicated solely by a page number, such as (219). Lastly, the closely intertwined nature of the two principal narratives addressed results in, as is to be expected, a periodic overlapping of themes or concepts. While this overlapping is kept to an absolute minimum, there are some instances in which it cannot be avoided. This does, in effect, further serve to emphasise the interdependent and symbiotic relationship between the philosophical and the socio-historical perspectives in the work.

⁷ While further explorations of this strand of historical argument extend beyond the scope of this thesis, this is not to undermine the significant contribution that De Felice made to Italian historiography dealing with the era of Italian fascism. Although a controversial figure, frequently subject to accusations of being a Fascist "apologist", the importance of De Felice's work on *il Duce* and on what he saw as a distinction between Fascism as an ideology and "Mussolinian Fascism" cannot be emphasised enough.

Strictly speaking, the objective here is to explore the nature of Flaiano's historical and philosophical perspective, assessing the manner in which this combined vision manifests itself in the text. In fact, perhaps - although this is certainly open to question - it is at the point of intersection between the two narratives forming the focus of this thesis that the essence of the novel is crystallised. Indeed, the fusion of an existentialist, ontological narrative with a set of concrete historical circumstances is the crucial mechanism which infuses the text with requisite authenticity. Suspended above the socio-historical context and not formally aligning itself with the rigidity of a specific philosophical doctrine, *Tempo di uccidere* forces the reader to question far more than the invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935. The lieutenant's angst-ridden tribulations, his Modernist dilemma, essentially reflect those of Everyman, who is burdened with powerlessness in the face of fate, who is forced into situations that are not only beyond his control but are also not necessarily of his own making, and whose only option is to resign himself to the limitations of the human condition.

Chapter Two

“Le colonie si fanno con la Bibbia alla mano, ma non ispirandosi a ciò che vi è scritto” (Flaiano, 2008: 289).

**Exploring elements of the socio-historical
narrative of *Tempo di uccidere***

2.1 Introduction⁸

Un soldato scende dal camion, si guarda intorno e momora “Porca miseria!”. Egli sognava di un'Africa convenzionale, con alti palmizi, banane, donne che danzano, pugnali ricurvi, un miscuglio di Turchia, India, Marocco, quella terra ideale dei films Paramount denominata Oriente, che offre tanti spunti agli autori dei pezzi caratteristici per orchestra. Invece trova una terra uguale alla sua, più ingrata anzi, priva d'interesse. L'hanno preso in giro. (Flaiano, 2008: 290)

The majority of the critiques of Ennio Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere* focus on the literary and philosophical significance of the novel, often drawing parallels with the works by Kafka and Camus, amongst others, and hence elevating the journey of the protagonist to an ahistorical context. While the ontological themes which emerge through the anonymous lieutenant's experience in Abyssinia can be deemed of enduring value, 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. The literary evocation of the colonial landscape is manifested through both the psychological state of the protagonist as well as through the descriptions of his surroundings. This landscape, both physical and metaphorical, forms an integral part of the fictional fabric of the novel. Thus, the colonial theatre of war does not act only as 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 1935 Italian war of conquest in Abyssinia.

Given that literary works are necessarily connected to the historical contexts in which they are both set and written, the connection between the novel and the Italo-Ethiopian War is no different. This is further illustrated by the fact that scattered throughout the novel are palpable evocations of sentiments present in the author's diary. This diary, entitled *Aethiopia: Appunti per una canzonetta*, was written during Flaiano's period of military service in Abyssinia between 13 November 1935 and 27 April 1936. It is through reading the novel in conjunction with this autobiographical text that, one could argue, an anti-colonial vision in *Tempo di uccidere* materialises. That notwithstanding, the conflicted perspective of the first-person protagonist infuses the fictional work with, at the very least, an ambivalence in the face of the imperial undertaking. It is important to note here that, although the context in which the events of the plot occur is inspired by Flaiano's experience, it does not necessarily follow that the novel can be considered a seemingly objective,

⁸ Please note that parts of this chapter, primarily in section 2.3 but also in the introduction, have been re-adapted from an article published for *Italian Studies in South Africa*. Nasson, L. “Alla base di ogni espansione, il desiderio sessuale: Negotiating exoticism and colonial conquest in Ennio Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere*”. 25 (1), 40-58.

realist and plausible account of the war under the guise of fiction. In other words, as Daniele Fioretti argues:

il romanzo è in polemica con la pretesa di oggettività tipica del neorealismo; Flaiano si riconosce maggiormente nella linea della rivista *Solaria* i cui collaboratori [...] portano avanti un'idea di romanzo che travalichi l'oggettività, definita da Gadda 'residuo fecale della storia', rivolgendosi piuttosto al mondo interiore dei personaggi e dell'autore, ai pensieri e ai ricordi (Fioretti, 1999: 170).

There is a discernible symbiotic relationship between the physical landscape of the Abyssinian plateau and the interior world of the lieutenant. With the landscape often acting as the canvas onto which his ontological uncertainties are projected, the objective reality of the colonial war also becomes a means through which questions of conscience and consciousness transpire. The interdependence of the socio-historical and the existentialist narratives is thus evident, elucidated in the symbolism of the army doctor's aphorism, "l'imperialismo, come la lebbra, si cura con la morte" (159).

This chapter looks at some of the elements of the socio-historical narrative in Flaiano's novel. First exploring the context of the Italian fascist state in the 1930s and the history of Italian colonialism, the focus will then turn to the depiction of the colonial experience in the novel, exploring the extent to which we can consider the work "anti-fascist", or, on a broader scale, "anti-colonial". This period of history cannot be understood without reference to the wider European context of the interwar years, or viewed as an isolated episode which is disconnected from the historical events which preceded it. Furthermore, the depiction of the exotic cannot be understood without reference to other examples of the colonial relationships within the wider tradition of the European literary canon during and in the aftermath of the late 19th century Scramble for Africa. Needless to say, the imagination of the "other" in European socio-political, artistic and literary culture has a tradition which originates centuries earlier, as far back as to the likes of Herodotus in the late 5th and early 4th centuries BC. Although it is a motif which has evolved as the contact between the "Old" and "New" World increased, the foundation of this image has remained largely static. It is indeed this rigid stereotype which is explored, questioned and undermined by Flaiano. In overtly subverting the power relationship between coloniser and colonised, the author ruptures a paradigm deeply established in colonial literature.

A comprehensive analysis of the Italo-Ethiopian War was largely neglected by Italian historical scholarship of the post-1945 era, and until relatively recently, was dominated by histories written by ex-colonial officials or politicians who certainly would not have been quick to denounce the atrocities committed during the fascist colonial rule. A shift in historiography, pioneered by the

likes of Angelo Del Boca, Alberto Sbacchi, Nicola Labanca and Giorgio Rochat, however, has allowed for a collective reimagination of Italian colonial experience. It is a reimagination that indicates a conscious questioning of the pervasive myth of “Italiani brava gente” and encourages a more open engagement with the realities of Italian aggression in the Horn of Africa. Without doubt, the history of the Italian presence in Africa in the 20th century is one which is profoundly marred by controversy. The use of chemical weapons to suppress the Abyssinian people during the 1935-1936 war and during the years of occupation is only one of a number of incidents of brutality which have come to characterise Italian colonialism (and indeed colonialism at large). What is important to note here, moreover, is that the vicious means of oppression employed by the Italian military in the euphemistic process of “pacification” were not restricted to fascist Italy and the period of Mussolini’s rule, but were also present during liberal Italy’s conquest of Cirenaica and Tripolitania, later united as Libya (Bosworth, 2010: 241). In spite of growing historical evidence of such brutality, there has been considerable official reluctance to confront Italy’s colonial past and pay homage to the thousands of East Africans who suffered and perished under the iron fist of the colonial authorities and the military⁹. The contributions of the aforementioned historians (and others) to the uncovering of well-concealed facts of expansion in Africa has been central to the foundation of a more candid historiographical approach to Italian colonialism.

The development in historiography in recent decades has not necessarily been matched in the field of literature, however, and the few works to have emerged from Italian East Africa have, until recently, been largely buried under the dust of this cloudy colonial past. In Italy, the end of 2010 saw the posthumous reprinting of Indro Montanelli’s first novel, in conjunction with a collection of his letters, *XX Battaglione Eritreo*, edited by Angelo del Boca. Del Boca and Montanelli, however, spent the larger part of the late 20th century on opposite sides of the political and historiographical spectrum, the latter vociferously refuting the evidence of inhumane tactics employed by the Italian colonial army under Fascism (Montanelli, 2010: IV). It was only much later in his career, with the value of hindsight (or the “social motivation” of the moral imperatives of the era) that Montanelli recognised what he refers to as the “error” that was the 1935 invasion. Placing heavy emphasis on the emotional and psychological spirit of the invasion, he wrote in a *Corriere della Sera* article that:

Politicamente e storicamente, l’impresa di Abissinia fu un madornale errore. Essa lanciò il nostro Paese, con due secoli in ritardo, in una gara di potenza imperiale di cui gli altri Paesi europei avevano compreso l’inanità e se ne stavano ritirando [...] Ecco perché ripiango i

⁹ Of course, as is the case in many conflicts, the boundaries separating the opposing sides are often elastic. In other words, although many Abyssinians perished at the hands of the Italian colonial army, we cannot forget that there were also incidents of collusion, with Abyssinians, Libyans, Somalians and Eritreans fighting for the occupying forces. The reasons for this are varied and complex and often lie in domestic ethnic or cultural tension. Given the limitations of the scope of this thesis a detailed analysis of the internal factors is not deemed necessary. Worth noting, however, is that the character of Johannes is an old *askari*: a Abyssinian who fought for the Italians in earlier conflicts in Africa.

miei due anni di Abissinia. Non per l'impresa che non poteva che essere più anacronistica e sbagliata. Ma per i sentimenti e gli entusiasmi che noi, o almeno molti di noi, ci avevamo messo dentro. Fu lì che io, e tanti altri come me, vedendo l'uso che ne faceva l'impennacchiato pardrone che ce li aveva ispirati, consumammo e perdemmo la nostra innocenza (as cited in Montanelli, 2010: XXIII).

With the republication of Montanelli's African writings comes the possibility for extensive research into Italian colonial literature from East Africa, whether in the form of letters, journals or fiction. Although the extent to which one can define Flaiano's novel as belonging formally to this genre is debatable, a glance at Montanelli's *XX Battaglione Eritreo*¹⁰ has the potential to reveal a great deal about the socio-historical vision at the heart of *Tempo di uccidere*. Indeed, in an uncanny contraposition, in both novels we see an overt reference to a journey of consciousness. In the prologue to Montanelli's work, the narrator explains "Sono in Africa anche per ragioni letterarie: non a cercar 'colore', ma a cercarvi una coscienza d'uomo. Necessaria a tutti, ma specialmente a un artista. Ecco il mio profitto personale di guerra: una coscienza d'uomo" (Montanelli, 2010: VII). For the protagonist in Flaiano's novel, his experience in Abyssinia is also, albeit inadvertently so, the catalyst for his awareness of self. As the anonymous lieutenant reflects, "Ma sì, l'Africa è lo sgabuzzino delle porcherie, ci si va a sgranchirsi la coscienza" (94).

Significant in the socio-historical narrative of *Tempo di uccidere* is the way in which the protagonist's oscillation between the orthodox and the unexpected reveals what initially appears to be an ambiguous vision of colonialism. While this vision is not strong enough to be defined as ideology, it is equally not faint enough to be ignored. As mentioned in the introduction, while on one hand the novel's gaze is retrospective, looking towards the early 20th century in its evocation of themes of alienation and disease, its vision can also be considered simultaneously "progressive". The slightly bitter, sceptical and sardonic glance of the author, evident in both his diary and in the novel itself, reveals at its core a desire to disassociate himself from the political and cultural imperatives of his era. It is a wry approach to his reality which is encapsulated by one of his later aphorisms, "In Italia i fascisti si dividono in due categorie: i fascisti e gli antifascisti" (as cited in Galeotti, 2000: 12). As Fioretti argues, through placing *Tempo di uccidere* into the more expansive and well-established framework of colonial writers (he cites Kipling, Forster, Conrad and Céline as examples)¹¹, the novel acquires new, universal meaning:

¹⁰ Indro Montanelli (1909-2001) is widely considered the most important Italian journalist of the 20th century, having written extensively for a range of publications, including *Corriere della Sera*, *Giornale nuovo* and *Voce*, the latter two of which he founded in 1974 and 1994 respectively. In addition to his exhaustive list of articles, Montanelli also published over fifty books, including *L'Italia nel Novecento*. He fought in East Africa between May 1935 and late summer 1936 (Montanelli, 2010: II).

¹¹ One needs to mention here that, on both merit and impact, one cannot genuinely compare this group of authors to Flaiano. The influence of Flaiano's work has been far less marked than that of Forster or Kipling, and his contribution

[...] non si tratta più soltanto di un testo critico del fascismo, ma più in generale il libro assume la valenza di aspra denuncia della violenza e della sopraffazione sempre connesse a ogni impresa coloniale [...] Ciò che gli interessa, di nuovo, non è tanto il dato concreto quanto l'analisi di un meccanismo che sembra ripetersi immutabile nel corso della storia umana (Fioretti, 2009: 174).

The complexities which characterise the ontological narrative are equally pertinent when looking at the socio-historical elements of the novel. Imbued with contradictions and inconsistencies, Flaiano's portrayal of colonial experience in Abyssinia moves between the banal and the absurd. In capturing the uncertainties of both the collective and the individual experience of the imperial enterprise, the author shies away from glorifying specific political mandates or blatantly castigating the role of the young Italian soldier. In essence, he explores the "grey areas" of history and of human experience. Just as the nature of the philosophical and psychological narrative makes impossible by necessary consequence a clearly defined path of interpretation, so too the aspects which form the socio-historical narrative transcend more "traditional" colonial or post-colonial literary exegeses¹². Ultimately, both the physical and the metaphysical journey upon which the Italian lieutenant embarks form the impetus for the process of self-discovery. Not only exposed to the duplicitous nature of the imperial rhetoric, he is also forced to confront that which is revealed to be the illusion of strength and certainty at the heart of his psyche. Both of these acts of revelation are entrenched in the vague and often paradoxical nature of the text. As Angiolo Bandinelli concludes, in *Tempo di uccidere*:

una fitta trama di suggerimenti simbolici si frappone ad una definizione puntuale dell'accadimento e delle sue coordinate. Maria Corti ha scritto che l'Africa di Flaiano è uno scenario 'lievemente onirico'. Direi piuttosto che tutto il romanzo è 'onirico', immerso nella angosciosa multiformità del sogno, o dell'incubo. Si tratta dell'incubo della perdita di sé, delle proprie ragioni esistenziali (Bandinelli, 1994: 91).

It is the context of the Italo-Ethiopian War, distant from the busy streets of Rome and from Florentine *affreschi*, that allows Flaiano to explore the philosophical themes that form the essence of the novel. The experience of conquest, reducing man to his most brutal state, does not inspire feelings of so-called moral, cultural or racial superiority in the protagonist. Rather, it precipitates his demise.

to the literary canon, both in terms of aesthetics and in terms of impact, is significantly less than that of these authors. However, in terms of thematic nuances, it is fair to argue that there are certain literary echoes of these authors in the novel, in spite of the fact that they belong to a different historical period, prior to the outbreak of the Second World War.

¹² By this, one refers primarily to the various interpretative frameworks of Postcolonial Studies, which would here not be wholly appropriate given that a solely "colonial" or "post-colonial" reading of the novel would be reductive.

2.2 Why Abyssinia, why 1935? Historical precedents to the Italo-Ethiopian War

E poi
E poi sarà finita
La nostra gioventù (Flaiano, 2008: 300).

Mussolini's decision to invade Abyssinia in 1935 has been often described as anachronistic. As the likes of more established colonial powers were experiencing increasing discontent and internal revolt in their respective colonies, the fascist leadership took decisive steps towards attaining imperial glory. Having attempted and failed to occupy Abyssinia in 1896 (an embarrassment that certainly weighed more heavily on the mind of the bellicose Mussolini than it necessarily did on that of the Italian population), the expanse of Italian colonial territory in Africa by 1935 was negligible compared to that of Britain and France. This is true not only in terms of square miles controlled by the *Patria*, but also of the numbers of colonial subjects, the size of the settler populations, and the economic benefits generated by colonial exploitation. Historical explanations for the invasion in 1935 range from emphasising Mussolini's desire to recover Italy's former glory (and that of the Roman Empire) to underlining the need to distract the attention of the Italian population from internal problems created by rising levels of unemployment and increasing economic hardships in the early 1930s (Bosworth, 2010: 234). In his recently published work *Alliance of the Colored Peoples: Ethiopia and Japan before World War II*, J. Calvitt Clarke III explores a lesser-known impetus behind the war: that, amongst other reasons for the Italian invasion lay the perceived need to block Japan's commercial and military advances into Northeast Africa. Many Abyssinians, he argues, turned towards Japan – the self-styled “leader of the world's coloured peoples” – for support and inspiration. Through appealing to popular Japanese opinion and offering commercial opportunities, the Abyssinians endeavoured to contain the pressing threat of a stronger Italy encroaching upon their nation (James Currey Publishers, 2011: para.1, accessed 5 January 2012). It would, however, be simplistic to reduce the invasion of Abyssinia to any one of these reasons, which essentially rely on the notion of the war of conquest being an isolated episode. As Labanca points out, it is impossible to “single out the peculiar, the novel and the dramatic aspects of fascist colonialism by abstracting it from the experience of global imperialism between the two wars” (Labanca, 2003: 38). Thus, this undercuts the widespread interpretation of the Italo-Ethiopian war as simply a “Mussolinian masterpiece” (Labanca, 2003: 38).

At the time of the Fascists' ascent to power in 1922, Italy had colonial territories in Eritrea, the 'first-born colony', Somalia, Tripolitania and Cirenaica (later united as Libya)¹³. Neither Eritrea nor Somalia were of particularly notable economic value to the Italians, and colonial revenue generated from imports and exports from these territories was minimal. Given their position on the Mediterranean Sea, geographically and strategically Tripolitania and Cirenaica were of increased value to Italy, although the statistics related to trade and revenue still indicate a rather unsophisticated level of colonial exploitation (Labanca, 2003: 41). When compared to the African empires of Britain and France, whose systems of generating colonial revenue were better integrated into the national economy and whose dominance in the region was firmly established, one could have scarcely considered Italy an enduring colonial power in the Horn of Africa. By early 1943, the limited border adjustments and conquest of Ethiopia had certainly expanded Italy's share of colonial Africa, in terms of territory, colonial subjects and resources, but this expansion failed to subvert the significant limitations of Italian imperialism (Labanca, 2003: 41).

The colonial rhetoric of the fascist state, often emphasising the right of the Italian people to their slice of imperial glory, a veritable *posto al sole*, was never converted into a significant influx of Italians to the African colony. The public rationale of *il duce* betrayed a fundamental motive behind the pursuit of the imperial dream: that conquest and expansion would prove instrumental for the moral rejuvenation of the Italian nation (Duggan, 2008: 492). Mussolini continually (and fallaciously) stressed the incapacity of the Italian state to cater for all its citizens, justifying the need for an African outpost as a means of repopulation into the supposedly fertile lands of East Africa¹⁴. As Christopher Duggan argues, herein lies a fundamental paradox of fascist propaganda. On one hand, the regime emphasised fecundity and promoted childbirth as a central tenet of the "new Italian Fascist". On the other hand, however, much of the rationale for imperial conquest lay in the idea of expanding an empire to cater for a theoretically ever-burgeoning population. He notes that as early as 1924 Mussolini asserted that the peninsula was too small, mountainous and rocky to feed its 40 million inhabitants, a claim which is rendered logically incongruent when we consider the fascist campaign known as the "battle for births". In fact, figures suggest that only 39,000 farmers relocated to *Africa Orientale Italiana*, significantly fewer than initially predicted (Duggan, 2008:

¹³ The acquisition of Tripolitania and Cirenaica was a result of the Italo-Turkish war in 1911, under Giovanni Giolitti's rule.

¹⁴ In his autobiography, the English translation of which was published in 1939 (the Italian original was published 1928) Mussolini writes of Tripolitania and Cirenaica: "These two colonies alone cannot solve our population problem. But with goodwill and the typical colonising qualities of Italians, we can give value to two reasons which were owned by Rome and which must grow to the greatness of their past and contribute to the new and great expanding possibilities of our general economic progress" (Mussolini, 1939: 213).

493)¹⁵. Moreover, the establishment of the colony, which in itself was never as tightly controlled as Mussolini liked to portray, was precarious at best. The protracted conflict which followed the capture of Addis Abeba in May 1936, led by a vastly technologically inferior but relatively effective Abyssinian resistance movement, is testament to this. Far from having a tight hold on the local population, the political and social influence of the colonial government thus stretched little further than the capital.

There was marked domestic motivation behind Mussolini's decision to invade Abyssinia in 1935, not least of which was the desire of *il duce* to see his pugnacious rhetoric of the 1920s and 1930s culminate in a war on foreign soil. R.J.B Bosworth notes that De Felice's reading of the invasion hinges almost exclusively on what he sees as the failure of Fascism on the homefront. However, as Bosworth counter-argues, "in recounting the events of 1935, the history of foreign policy should not surrender on every front to the history of advertising" (Bosworth, 2010: 242). Indeed, the period leading up to the invasion in May 1935 was one of diplomatic charades, attempts at appeasement and conflicting, often discordant, responses on the international front to Mussolini's intentions. Distracted by the threat of Hitler, the response of the League of Nations with regard to fascist designs on Abyssinia was, by and large, weak and if anything, too late. Evelyn Waugh, a journalist in Abyssinia at the time of the capture of Addis Abeba, describes a cartoon appearing in the *British Evening Standard* in the Summer of 1935, showing three apes representing the Throne of Justice, each one covering their eyes, ears and mouth respectively. Underneath, the legend "See no Abyssinia, Hear no Abyssinia, Speak no Abyssinia". Waugh continues to note that the cartoon, rather than describing the attitude of Great Britain, captures the mood of the League of Nations in Geneva at the time of the invasion (Waugh, 2000: 39). Ultimately, by October 1935, no amount of international expostulation or economic sanctions imposed on the fascist state, however limited, could dissuade the Italian leader from attempting to expand the frontiers of the *Belpaese*.

On the evening of October 2nd, 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 piazza 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 ("L'Italia in piedi", cited in *Giornale di Brindisi*: 3 October 1935).

Indeed, the 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,

¹⁵ Angelo Del Boca notes that initially it was hoped that between one and ten million Italian peasants would relocate to Abyssinia to enjoy their *posto al sole* (Del Boca, 2005: 207)

and the reality confronted by the Italian soldiers upon arrival, is reflected in the quote at the beginning of this chapter: “Egli sognava di un’Africa convenzionale, con alti palmizi, banane, donne che danzano, pugnali ricurvi [...] Invece trova una terra uguale alla sua, più ingrata anzi, priva d’interesse. L’hanno preso in giro” (Flaiano, 2008: 290). This was not, nonetheless, the case for all Italian soldiers. Until recently, some, including Indro Montanelli, looked back on their time in Africa with profound nostalgia, with the journalist capturing the spirit of his contemporaries when he writes at the close of his novel: “Questa guerra è per noi come una bella lunga vacanza dataci dal Gran Babbo in premio di tredici anni di scuola. E, detto fra noi, era ora” (Montanelli, 2010: 149). That said, however, the chasm between popular imagination and reality which is evoked in Flaiano’s diary is also referred to in Montanelli’s work with remarkable similarity. One could argue that the sole difference between the two perspectives lies in tone, with Montanelli resorting to the predictable trappings of colonialist discourse, as illustrated below:

Vedete un po’ quanto male ha fatto l’Africa di Hollywood, così come i pellicolai americani l’hanno mandata a spasso pel mondo: quest’Africa piena di insidie, di malattie, di sete, di scorpioni, di *niam-niam* antropofaghi, di aspidi e di torture cinesi. Se non chiarifichiamo in tempo, finiremo col diventare buffoni anche noi. Franchezza per franchezza: compiangiamo di tutto cuore coloro che subiscono i trentotto gradi all’ombra di Roma, Firenze e altri paradisi europei, noi relegati nell’inferno africano (Montanelli, 2010: 24).

By October 1935, the years of colonial propaganda had come to fruition, and the harsh realities of the impending conflict were certainly not tangible to the anonymous Italian soldier, who knew very little of the geography, ethno-cultural practices and local vernaculars which awaited him (Dominioni, 2008: 37). Propped up by popular support – however limited in scope - and nationalist fervour, the colonial adventure which awaited the Italian nation was to provide Mussolini with the optimal opportunity to appease the regime's propagandists, to emphasise the military superiority of Italy, to expand her empire and to capitalise on economic interests linked to the Italian-African interchange (Labanca, 2003: 54).

Seven months after his speech on October 2nd, on the same balcony of the Palazzo Venezia in Rome, *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 (as cited in Preti, 1968: 184).

An empire of peace it certainly was not, as the thousands of Abyssinian victims of the rapacious invasory tactics, which notoriously included the use of chemical weapons, bear testament. Indeed, the victory itself can hardly be considered surprising given the technical and numerical advantage

enjoyed by the Italians. The Italian troops, the largest colonial expedition ever sent to the continent by any European power and amounting to 650,000 men, far outnumbered the 300,000-strong enemy. Additionally, while the Abyssinian army had access to modern rifles, they had no military planes or machine guns and very little artillery (Duggan, 2008: 502). In spite of this glaring inequality, the nature of the terrain proved difficult for the Italians and they were forced to resort to the use of mustard gas and shells filled with arsine in order to suppress the local armed forces (Duggan, 2008: 503). Even the conclusion of the conquest brought little respite, and the “*impero di pace*” of which Mussolini speaks found little correlation in the years which followed May 1936. This is demonstrated by the violent suppression of Ethiopian resistance movements until 1941, and the massacre of members of the Coptic church following the attempt on Graziani's life¹⁶ in February 1937. That which Mussolini could not have known at the time of his victorious speech was, in the words of R.J.B Bosworth, “that he was never fated to visit Ethiopia, and the fascist revolution would only scratch its immemorial soil. Mussolini had become the *Duce* of one of the most fleeting empires in history” (Bosworth, 2010: 250).

Del Boca argues that studies on Italian colonialism are sparse and have, until recently, been dominated by an exaltation and celebration of the “benevolent colonial” that retains relevance in the 21st century (Del Boca, 2003: 224). Indeed, the nature of Italian colonialism is today often still defined as being in direct opposition to the violent and inhumane policies of other European countries, although Italy cannot be deemed any more of a would-be good colonial power than her contemporaries. Benedetto Croce notes that Italy's colonies “had been acquired with its blood, and administered and led toward civil European life with its ingenuity and with the expenditure of its relatively meagre finances” (as cited in Del Boca, 2003: 21). What is interesting to note here is that even Croce, an internationally renowned intellectual, was not entirely unenthusiastic upon hearing of the capture of Addis Abeba in 1936 (Duggan, 2008: 502). Conservative estimates show that 100,000 Libyans were killed between 1911-1932, 3000-4000 Ethiopians were killed between 1935-1941, and the fascists employed a wide range of means in order to crush resistance. This included, as we have noted, aerial bombardment and chemical weapons (a fact that was denied by the Italian government until 1996, once again reinforcing the air of denialism that has characterised Italy's relationship with its colonial past). The perpetuation of the myth based on the concept of “*Italiani brava gente*”, Del Boca asserts, can largely be attributed to the behaviour of the ruling class, which failed to engage in a debate regarding the colonial endeavour in the post-fascist era. This could have provoked an open discussion on the nature of Italian colonialism in a public arena, thus

¹⁶ Rudolfo Graziani, Viceroy of Ethiopia from June 1936 – November 1937, earned himself the nickname of “*il macellaio*” (the butcher) as a result of his excessive cruelty, the one of the most infamous examples of which is the massacre at Debra Libanos. (Del Boca, A. 1969: 224)

deconstructing official fabrications and preserving the values of the lesson learned from the country's experience as a colonial power. While other European powers participated in such a debate, it is only through recent restorative historiography and some state documentaries, most notably *L'impero: un'avventura africana* (1986) and *Mal d'Africa* (1968) that Italian colonial Africa has been reimagined (Del Boca, 2003: 20).

The characteristic climate of national self-absolution found its most immediate expression in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' hagiographic fifty-volume publication, *L'Italia in Africa*, which glorifies Italian colonialism and its supposedly "benevolent difference" in the face of colonial powers (Del Boca, 2003: 18). Written largely (although not exclusively) by former colonial officials, *L'Italia in Africa* (1963) is an unsurprisingly falsified account which makes no mention of the extensive deployment of chemical weapons in Ethiopia between 1935-1940, of the concentration camps in Libya, Eritrea and Somalia, or of the destruction of the Coptic church which led to the deaths of 1,200 deans and priests¹⁷. The myths that are immortalised by this publication continued (and perhaps still continue) to be maintained by nostalgists, ex-servicemen and older historical revisionists. Indeed, one of the most disturbing consequences of this denialism so entrenched in national history is that it has allowed for Italians stained with colonial crimes¹⁸ to be acquitted, and for the enterprise to escape formal condemnation.

However, as Del Boca notes, within this "anti-historical" debate, politicians did not enjoy the support of the international public or of the UN. The only country to be left in Italy's trusteeship after the end of the Second World War was the impoverished Somalia, for a period of ten years. Ethiopia regained its independence under Haile Selassie; Libya became a sovereign state under King Idris es-Senussi and Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia in 1952. The conditions set out by the 1947 Peace Accord were explicit, and certainly did not favour the former colonial power: Ethiopia would receive all artworks, objects of religious significance, archives and so on taken by the Italians after 3rd October 1935, and within seven years would receive \$25 million in war reparations. After a range of petty arguments and rather tenuous negotiations, Italy finally paid 10.5 billion lira in 1956, while the artworks and religious or historical artefacts were returned in dribs and drabs. The symbol of Italy's general lack of co-operation or full compliance with the accord became the Axum Obelisk, which during the war of conquest was taken and placed in Piazza Porta Capena in Rome. After many broken promises on the part of the Italians, and various diplomatic attempts to resolve

¹⁷ This occurred after the attempt on Rudolfo Graziani's life in February 1937.

¹⁸ Including those who participated in the campaigns to reconquer Libya (1922-32), against Somali guerillas of Migiurtinia (1926-32), the war against Ethiopia (1935-36) and the failed attempt to crush Ethiopian partisans (1936-41).

the issues, the obelisk was still standing outside the offices of FAO in 1999 (Del Boca, 2003: 21). Further indication of this tendency towards denialism or exculpation within parts of scholarly and political circles is illustrated by the fact that the 1981 historical film *Il leone del deserto* about the Italian suppression of the Senussi in Libya, remains banned in Italy to this day, on the grounds that it could prove damaging to the integrity of the army (Duggan, 2008: 498). It is thus clear that the question of the nature of Italian colonialism remains relevant and contentious, even in modern day Italian society.

In general, historical scholarship dealing with Italian fascism has focused more on the cult figure of Mussolini than it has on the legacy left by the regime beyond the borders of the peninsula. Within Italian academe, one has to pay heed to the influence of one of Mussolini's most renowned (and, in some respects, most notorious) biographers. Renzo De Felice's vexed historical revisionism was instrumental to the re-imagining of Fascism and Mussolini from the 1960s. As Bosworth argues, De Felice – a neo-Rankean “Anti-Anti-Fascist” – has had a remarkable influence on the historical establishment, in spite of his dangerously apologist attitude towards Fascism and, more specifically, towards *il duce* (Bosworth, 2010: 8). Indeed, the rise of the Del Boca-Labanca-Rochat *et al* school of thought can primarily be understood as a reaction against the pernicious “De Felice approach” which, in recent years, has become a form of political currency employed by the new Right in Italian politics (Bosworth, 2010: 9). This complex and contested thread of historiography of the post-1945 era further serves to highlight the strikingly unusual foundation of the socio-historical narrative in *Tempo di uccidere*. In 1947, with the ashes of the Italian colonial empire still glowing and the brutal realities of the conflict still far removed from mainstream historical scholarship, the author succeeds in presenting us, for the most part, with an unembellished depiction of the often absurd, banal and merciless nature of imperialism. The protagonist in *Tempo di uccidere* embodies the contradictions of the Italo-Ethiopian War, is witness to the inhumane practices of the Italian army, and while at times he represents the archetypal European soldier, his attitude towards the exotic “other” is coloured by irony and self-doubt. The novel, in reflecting the tragedy of one Italian soldier, reflects the tragedy of all the actors in the theatre of colonial war.

2.3 Textual analysis: Negotiating exoticism and exploring colonial conquest in *Tempo di uccidere*

Gli abissini della nostra civiltà apprezzano principalmente tre cose: il fucile, il sapone, il fiasco. Dinanzi ai fiaschi rimangono incantati; ma quello che li stupisce di più è il vedere con quanta noncuranza noi li gettiamo via, appena vuoti (Flaiano, 2008: 304).

Alla base di ogni espansione, il desiderio sessuale (Flaiano, 2008: 289).

While *Tempo di uccidere* cannot be considered a “colonial” novel per se¹⁹, there emerge a number of literary traits which belong to the trope of colonial literature, not least of which is the idea of the exotic. Oscillating between reverence and repugnance, the protagonist’s attitude towards the imperial enterprise is largely framed by his attitude towards the exotic. In other words, he moves between showing disdain for his “inferiors”, namely the Abyssinian colonial subjects, and being envious of the premodern societal landscape of the East African plateau. Whether dehumanising the “other” or celebrating the landscape untainted by the trappings of modernity, the lieutenant’s attitude towards the exotic is largely ambivalent, suffused with his characteristically discordant patterns of behaviour. This ambivalence in perspective is arguably a product of the divergent, split narrative voice, contributing to the lieutenant’s conflicted cast of mind. Through historicising the work, however, the exoticist representations of the “other” may seem either problematic or obvious. They need to be understood as being borne out of an era in which little more could be expected of the average Italian soldier in *Africa Orientale Italiana* than an attitude framed by imperialist fascist rhetoric of a “civilising” colonial expedition²⁰ into the depths of the so-called “Dark Continent”. In fact, one could interpret the instances of traditional exoticist depictions of the “other” as a deliberate attempt on the part of the author to lampoon colonial attitudes (an argument that is supported by the sceptical vision at the heart of the socio-historical narrative). This, it goes without saying, would further reinforce the notion of Flaiano’s “ideological enlightenment”.

The image of the exotic is long established within the European literary canon, although it has generally been treated as a subcategory in the Italian (and indeed also French) tradition. The proliferation of the more familiar images of the Inca world of Francesco Algarotti (1712-1764), of Marinetti and D’Annunzio’s Libya, Comisso’s Eritrea, Ungaretti’s Egypt, Gozzano’s India and Ceylon and Emilio Salgari’s Malaya, for example, have characterised exoticist discourse. As a result, there is little known or written about more minor works set in Africa (Bandinelli, 1994: 85).

¹⁹ In other words, it falls neither into the framework of novels written during the height of colonialism, glorifying its cause, nor into later novels which openly chastise the premises upon which imperial expansion was founded.

²⁰ The notion of a “civilising” mission as a justification for colonialism is of course by no means unique to the Italian imperial enterprise.

In *Tempo di uccidere*, exoticism defies clear definition, and Bandinelli goes as far as to argue that the novel in fact lacks the nomenclature which is so central to the forging of the sense of allure and difference in exoticist literature. The use of sparse language and stark images of desolation in the landscape are in sharp contrast to the utopian motif of a distant land, and as the critic writes, “L’Africa di Flaiano è, o può essere, l’Abruzzo, nella sua povertà grigia e tetra [...] è monotona, o meglio *monocorde*” (Bandinelli, 1994: 87). However, through this mechanism of representation, Flaiano is able to project the themes onto a universal plane. In so doing, he allows *Tempo di uccidere* to be read more as a commentary on the human condition than as a recollection of an isolated Italian lieutenant stationed in a colonial outpost. The ease with which one can substitute the bleak Abyssinian landscape for post-war Italy is a fundamental aspect of the socio-historical narrative. In fact, it is this reciprocal transposition of place which proves vital in allowing the ontological themes to arise from the historical context of the 1935-1936 war. One could easily argue that the novel is less about Abyssinia than it is about Europe, and more specifically, Italy. Thus, as Daniele Fioretti argues:

La delusione del soldato [...] è la stessa delusione provata dall’autore giunto a contatto con un mondo che non gli appare diverso e favoloso come lo aveva sognato, ma anzi che rispecchia, in forma degradata, la sua stessa realtà occidentale. Ma la ricerca frustrata di un ambiente esotico può anche essere vista come un indice di una difficoltà di rapporto, da parte del soggetto occidentale, con una realtà che egli intende affrontare armato solo di preconcetti e di immagini letterarie e che si rivela invece drammaticamente simile alla sua [...] (Fioretti, 2009: 177).

The absence of images traditionally associated with the European exoticist trope does not, nevertheless, necessarily render Flaiano’s novel free from representations of the exotic. On one hand, in the description of the landscape, we see an inversion of the more conventional, utopian imagination of Africa. On the other hand, however, in the protagonist’s attitude towards the Abyssinian women, as well as in his reverence for the “virgin” society, we see palpable echoes of the colonial-exotic literary topos.

In the opening chapter of the novel, much like Dante in *Inferno* I, the lieutenant loses his way in a “selva oscura” after taking a short cut in search of a dentist (Simonetti, 1992: 17). 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). In reducing an entire population of women to the name “Mariam”, the protagonist ultimately robs the female “other” of her individuality, while simultaneously elevating the exotic encounter to a universal plane. Unable to cope with her slow suffering, he kills the woman, buries

her in a concealed grave, and echoing Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, embarks on a psychological journey in search of absolution. Overwhelmed 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 him to lose his ethical compass. Indeed, as Simonetti asserts, "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 1951 English edition of *Tempo di uccidere* (The Short Cut), translated by Stuart Hood, provides an optimal starting point from which to further explore the representation of the female "other". Marketed 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 a pool of water. Surrounded by ferns and waterlilies, 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. It evokes the idea 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 is suspended 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!²¹

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 the imperial experience, whether Chateaubriand or Loti, Conrad or Kipling. However, as is the case with these authors, Flaiano's novel cannot be reduced to such a simplistic interpretation. Its complexity lies not only in its existential considerations, but also in 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 novel²². This explains the often incongruent portrayals of the exotic "other". Indeed, the debate on the nature of colonialism emerges through the very opposition of these two voices, as well as in way in which the narrator

²¹ This is taken from the preface of the 1951 English translation, *The Short Cut*.

²² The effect of this narrative disjuncture on the existentialist narrative of *Tempo di uccidere* forms the focus of Chapter Four of this thesis.

engages with his environment. As Roberta Orlandini asserts in her article “(Anti)colonialismo in *Tempo di uccidere* di Ennio Flaiano”:

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 passata, 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 importance of this split first-person narration, a mechanism which Lucilla Sergiacomo defines as “narrative alternanza”, bridges the socio-historical and the ontological narratives in the novel. In the case of the former, as Orlandini states in the above extract, the presence of an older “narrative voice” blessed with the gift of hindsight serves to underscore the naïve and often insensitive attitude of his younger, “active soldier” self. In the case of the ontological narrative, as explored in Chapter Four, the split narration adopts plural significance, highlighting the lieutenant’s ineptitude, underscoring the ambiguities and contradictions with which his life is imbued.

The protagonist's first encounter with an Abyssinian 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 Petrarchan *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 this attribution of animal-like characteristics to the Ethiopian woman result in the patent dehumanisation of the “other”, but it also reinforces a relationship of subservience 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 woman, whose sexuality is intricately connected to her 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 argues, 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 where the power of the coloniser is asserted over that of the colonised. This link is reinforced by the use of words such as “lotta”, “difesa” and “dominio” to describe the interaction between the European and the colonial subject. Indeed, the power that is undeniably the central feature of colonialism (whether in the form of an asserted masculinity or through territorial conquest) is a significant feature of the exotic-erotic encounter. In this opening chapter of the novel, it is through the negotiation of this power that a critique of “prestigio colonialistico” (Corti, 1972: 1210) materialises. 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 infuses the term with a sense of irony and doubt, essentially questioning its validity, “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*²³. This is reiterated in one of the entries in *Aethiopia: Appunti per una canzonetta*, under the aptly-titled entry, “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

23 “Faccetta nera , piccola abissina/ ti porteremo a Roma, liberata/Dal Nostro unico tu sarai baciata/Sarai in Camicia Nera pure te”

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, 2008: 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 conveniently malleable 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 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). This is highlighted by Todorov, who writes of the exotic topos that:

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 significantly, the Italian conqueror. 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). Once again, this attitude seems to be reflected here somewhat ironically, giving way to a schism 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, on the homefront, the power balance between the fascist male and his obsequious female counterpart 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 the chapter entitled *La scorciatoia*, as the untouched expanse is directly associated with the femininity of the Abyssinian woman. As is the case with the colonisers' self-ordained right to assert their masculinity and power onto the landscape, the lieutenant imposes his “desideri abbastanza giusti” (43) onto Mariam. The colonial territory is thus an exotic retreat for the modern Fascist, 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).

If we return for a moment to the preface to the 1951 Signet translation of *Tempo di uccidere*, we see that Ethiopia is described as “ [...] that hyena-haunted, crocodile-infested, sinister country” (Flaiano, 1951: 1): 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. Trees which seem to be constructed out of *papier maché* or plants which resemble stuffed animals are placed alongside repeated references to the melancholy of the environment: the “noia” from which no-one can escape. Orlandini describes Flaiano’s Africa as:

[...]meno quella dei proconsoli e dei mercanti romani dell'Africa della colonia italiana [...]La percezione del paesaggio da parte del tenente risente quindi anchel'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 rappresenta la rigogliosità con immagini di morte (Orlandini, 1992: 481).

Flaiano establishes a slow, melancholic atmosphere, a ubiquitous “noia” which is as oppressive as the “caldo insopportabile” associated with the Abyssinian landscape, while the extensive repetition

of images serves to echo the stifling mood of the novel. In effect, this suffocating 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 can be running through that little brain? [...] It is a hundred to one that she has no thoughts whatsoever” (as cited in Todorov, 1993: 316). Ensclosed 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 lies at the intersection of 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 paramount to the thematic development of the novel, stops functioning in this first chapter. A concept of mechanically measured time is a symbol of modernity, and the encounter with Mariam thus happens *outside* of time (Orlandini, 1992: 485), rendering it eternal²⁴ 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 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 induced by 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

²⁴ The effect of this role of time is also referred to in Chapter Four of this thesis.

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 after his unchaste encounter, 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 vacillation between revering and reviling the exotic, accentuates the 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 conveyed by the narrator being quickly interrupted by the lieutenant's assumption that “una terra 'incivilizzata' non può [...] che essere abitata da esseri inferiori” (Orlandini, 1992: 481). This is despite the fact that the two voices are incorporated into one person. Shortly after the images of a Biblical paradise, in one of the most pertinent passages of this opening chapter, the lieutenant openly reflects:

Perché non capivo quella gente? Erano tristi animali, invecchiati in una terra senza uscita, erano grandi camminatori, grandi conoscitori di scorciatoie, forse saggi, ma antichi e incolti. Nessun di loro si faceva la barba ascoltando le prime notizie, né le loro colazione 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 modernity - and the “premodern simplicity” of the Ethiopians, is particularly pronounced. 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 the unit of time. However, unlike the Mariam of the plateau, the Mariam of the city is painted as a tragic figure, aspiring to something that she cannot be, confused, unhappy and

forever looked down upon. In this encounter 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, 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* [own italics]” (169), “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 condescension 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 accoutrements of Western society are ridiculed by the lieutenant, “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”. 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 central 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 come across as futile and almost absurd. This sentiment recalls that of Flaiano himself, writing in his diary in 1935: “l'uso che gli indigeni fanno di certe nostre parole è singolare [...] ogni loro desiderio assume un tono esagerato, falso” (Flaiano, 2008: 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 superiority, under the guise of “liberating” and “civilising” the native population. Caustically, Flaiano writes in his diary that “La civiltà è un’opinione”, an aphorism which elucidates his sentiment towards the Italian imperialism. Indeed, 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” (as cited in Corti, 2001: 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 an intransigent political stance (political judgement is largely replaced by moral judgement in the novel), when one looks at the portrayal of the colonial experience in the context of Flaiano's own views, the ambivalence of the novel can easily be interpreted as disguised anti-colonialism.

There are, without doubt, a number of ways in which an anti-colonial vision is filtered through Flaiano's text, and these manifestations are not solely restricted to the representation of the exotic "other". In both his diary and in the novel itself, a strong moral conviction permeates the narrative voice, whether it be the author himself or his fictional lieutenant. In the case of the latter, of course, this morality is constantly questioned and subverted by the presence of the split first-person narrator. Whether the archetypal corrupt Major or the indolent army doctor, Flaiano uses his characters to illustrate the frequently brutal aspects of colonialism, to undermine the motivations behind expansion, and to ridicule the assumptions of cultural, intellectual and political superiority of Western society. While this is not true of all the Italian characters of the novel (one need only think of the second lieutenant or the smuggler), it is undeniably a central mechanism with which the author is able to refract a frank perspective of the war of conquest. Similarly, the Abyssinian characters in the novel are primarily portrayed as antithetical to their European counterparts, largely rejecting concepts of ownership which, it must be said, are deeply inscribed in the unequal balance of power between conqueror and colonised (Trubiano, 2010:55). This opposition is amplified onto a political and cultural scale, as the lieutenant's experience in the East African country and his interactions with the subjects sees him abandoning the illusions that have hitherto underpinned his existence. This process of self-revelation is mirrored by the uncovering of the spurious principles on which the notion of imperialism is founded. Essentially, the "barbarous" society paradoxically proves not to be the would-be undeveloped Abyssinia, with its "premodern" population, its disease and superstition. Rather, in a powerful indictment not only of the colonial endeavour but also of the post-1945 state, Flaiano suggests that decay - political, social and cultural - lies deeply entrenched in the Mediterranean peninsula he called "home".

Marisa Trubiano argues that it was Flaiano's experience of Africa which was the catalyst for his rejection of both the rhetoric and the ideology of the Fascism. She argues that the direct, concrete writing style of *Tempo di uccidere*, which does not purport to represent an objective and knowable reality, emerges as a result of Flaiano having witnessed the "destruction of a society by its own rhetoric" (Trubiano, 2010: 55). The desire for objectivity and a search for a "truthful" representation of Italy's present and past in the aftermath of the indoctrination of Fascism were instrumental factors in fuelling the ideology of the neorealist movement in the 1940s and early 1950s. Flaiano's

novel, rather than espousing the possibility of representing reality, in effect symbolises the impossibility of a clear vision, “undercut (ting) the notion that a colonial society can observe, survey and possess a knowledge and understanding of the colonised culture” (Trubiano, 2010: 60). This vision, in fact, is commensurate with the ontological narrative in *Tempo di uccidere*, in which the idea of the impossibility of understanding the world, and ultimately ourselves, is key in the author’s philosophical perspective.

In closing, the multifaceted nature of the socio-historical narrative in *Tempo di uccidere* sees the confluence of a number of elements which frame that which can be interpreted as an anti-colonial vision in the novel²⁵. While the chosen focus of the textual analysis of this chapter has been an exploration of the “exotic”, it is incumbent upon us to remember that it is not the sole vehicle through which the socio-historical narrative is revealed. However, that which remains common to all manifestations of this narrative is that it is the protagonist who, in essence, embodies an extensive history of colonial attitudes. 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* hence provides us with rare insight into the nature of Italian occupation in Africa, beyond the diaries of officials or fascist propaganda. As one of the few works of fiction to emerge out of the 1935-1936 Italo-Ethiopian War, the novel is of great literary and historical significance, inasmuch as it questions the morality of the colonial enterprise, revealing a remarkably astute analysis of European imperialism. Nevertheless, as is characteristic of Flaiano’s style, the vision with which we as readers are provided betrays definition, and it is as a result of this that the socio-historical perspective is susceptible to being interpreted as more ambivalent than it is dissenting. Given Flaiano’s belief that it is impossible to convey reality or to show true understanding, the ideas which are rooted in this perspective are necessarily tenuous. In this manner, the author consciously rejects the neorealist quest for objective “truth”. As Marisa Trubiano writes:

Flaiano’s novel represents a reality that is constructed artificially. The entire African campaign, as any war, was for Flaiano a scripted event, directed by the political party in power. As a theatrical performance itself that unfolds in an eternal present, for Flaiano “la guerra è un happening, e questo spiega il successo che ha sempre avuto” (*Diario degli errori, Opere I*, 414) (Trubiano, 2010: 52).

Thus, the socio-historical vision of the novel is not exclusively tied to a given moment, to a specific geographical or cultural context. Rather, it is emblematic of a powerful universal indictment of all

²⁵ There remain aspects unexplored in this chapter, such as the interaction between Johannes and the lieutenant, which are worthy of further enquiry. The opposition of these two characters bridges both the ontological and the socio-historical narrative, and is explored in Chapter Five, entitled *Figures of strength, figures of weakness*.

forms of dogmatic rhetoric. In this way, therefore, Flaiano slices through the elaborate layers of national self-delusions, revealing a disenchantment with all shades of political doctrine.

Chapter Three

“La realtà è quella che noi riusciamo a far passare per tale”

-Ennio Flaiano (Quarantotto, 1994: 69).

Flaiano, the belated Modernist: Literary Precedents

3. Flaiano, the belated Modernist: Literary Precedents

Né vincitore né vinto, né innocente né colpevole, né malato né sano, né amato né ingannato: questa è la maschera in perpetua metamorfosi che si ottiene dalla somma degli eventi del romanzo. Il destino del tenente è segnato quindi dualisticamente dall'impossibilità sia di vincere che di perdere, sia di espiare le proprie colpe costituendosi sia di cancellarle autoassolvendosi (Sergiacomo, 1994: 37).

As hitherto established, published in an era in which neorealism as a phenomenon had become increasingly prominent and popular in both literature and film alike, Flaiano's fundamentally antirealist, and indeed somewhat anachronistic novel, certainly stands out as a unique contribution to the cultural milieu of mid 20th century Italian literature. Not only is it one of very few Italian novels of its time to openly engage with the 1935 colonial war of conquest in the Horn of Africa, but it also raises philosophical questions largely associated with the literary climate of Mitteleuropa. There are obvious echoes of this cultural movement - iconicised by the likes of Italo Svevo, Robert Musil and Franz Kafka in the early 20th century - in Flaiano's seminal novel. Indeed, as Claudia Quarantotto argues, one sees in the lieutenant the existential tragedy founded upon “l'impossibilità di 'formare' l'uomo alla scuola dell'esistenza [...], l'autoritratto di un 'uomo senza qualità', in versione mediterranea, che è l'inetto [...]che discende, per vie traverse, dal mitteleuropeo Italo Svevo” (Quarantotto, 1994: 68). Furthermore, in addition to the presence of the Mitteleuropean themes of alienation and malaise in the text, there are obvious remnants of a Pirandello or Tozzi-inspired vision of the world: a vision which is framed by the concept of ineptitude driven, no doubt, by the belief in the unknowability of reality and ultimately, of ourselves. It is a notion which resonates deeply with the words of Mattia Pascal, “Io non saprei proprio dire ch'io mi sia” (Pirandello, 2010: 212). Together, the presence of these principal philosophical and literary influences reveal the “anachronism” of Ennio Flaiano. In the “post-modern” epoch of the post-Second World War, the Pescaran author publishes, thematically speaking, a “pre-1939 novel”. In this way, therefore, we can consider him a belated Modernist.

In appearing at a time when prose and poetry were guided by post-war political sentiment and a return to the sparse imagery of realism, *Tempo di uccidere* represents a clear dissonance from its contemporary cultural landscape. This is evident, for example, through the widespread presence of allegory, essentially placing it in a space between a novel and a fable (Trequadrini, 1994: 57). The traditional interpretation of a fable is, however, here inverted, “la favola, dunque, non per dare una moralità o una certezza, ma per rappresentare il degrado del mondo e della coscienza” (Trequadrini, 1994: 59). It is this degeneration of the self which dominates the protagonist's consciousness in the novel, revealing at its source the human inability to compete with chance or to control our collective

destiny. Flaiano, like some of his early 20th century predecessors²⁶, hence challenges and negates the 19th century Positivist notions of objective certainty. In *Tempo di uccidere*, the centrality of the subjective dimension is thus clearly inspired by Italian (and indeed European) Modernism. Shattering the 19th century notion of a static and permanent identity, authors such as Svevo, Borgese and Pirandello openly questioned “l'idea dell'unità della coscienza e la sua supremazia sulle altre facoltà psichiche e diventa molto fragile la definizione di normalità quotidiana” (Dedola, 1992: 23). So too, decades later, does Ennio Flaiano.

In the aftermath of the tragedy that was the Second World War, the Pescaran author chooses to re-open this discussion on nature of reality and human consciousness. His decision to look backwards could be understood as a reaction to the socio-economic reality in post-fascist Italy, or to the horrors of the Second World War. In fact, Dedola argues that perhaps it was the effect of the First World War on writers such as Tozzi and Svevo which fractured the sense of a determinable reality in the protagonists of their respective works, “Forse che la letteratura tenta di censurare la tragedia della Grande Guerra? [...] Perché sia Tozzi che Svevo e Pirandello trovano proprio nella 'irraccontabilità della realtà contemporanea il tema dei loro racconti” (Dedola, 1992: 20). In writing *Tempo di uccidere*, one could argue that Flaiano’s rejection of the socio-political and cultural prerogatives of his contemporaries echoes his disillusionment with the both the fascist and the post-fascist epoch. Moreover, as is to be expected, the experience of the author’s fictional lieutenant in the Abyssinian sphere of war acts as a stimulus for his exploration of ideas of the self and of existence. Consequently, an understanding of his sceptical world view is dependent on the analysis of *how* the socio-historical narrative of the novel is manipulated to expose the crisis of the “inetto” and “malato”, revealing a transposition of an earlier literary topos onto the post-Second World War canvas.

Themes of ineptitude and malaise are evoked in *Tempo di uccidere* in the form of the philosophical concerns of the protagonist. However, these are not always rendered explicit, given that they are frequently entrenched in the heavy symbolism of the novel. Essentially, his journey through Abyssinia and the historical events which frame the chronological narrative of the plot are elevated to an existential level. As Sergiacomo argues:

Flaiano costruisce infatti, sulla stessa linea di Kafka e Camus, una storia esemplare di valore allegorico e dai toni visionari e simbolici. L'evento bellico, la guerra d'Abissinia, è solo uno spunto di partenza, subito relegato al ruolo di palcoscenico della drammatica storia del protagonista, che poggia su un impianto psicologico e completamente avulso dai toni del romanzo di guerra (Sergiacomo, 1996: 76).

²⁶ Here one refers to authors in whom the themes of individual alienation, ineptitude and disease form a central focus of their literary and philosophical vision: Musil, Mann, Pirandello, Svevo and others.

Nevertheless, an interpretation of the socio-historical context as “solo uno spunto di partenza” is perhaps somewhat reductive, and one could argue that it reflects a broader tendency within Italian academic scholarship to avoid an open engagement with its colonial past in East Africa. In the same way that the lieutenant's ineptitude is consistently emphasised through his futile search for a pretext as a means of justification, so Abyssinia and the Italian war of conquest act as a pretext for a deeper exploration of notions of guilt, expiation, doubt and the world in which he finds himself. It is through the experience of conflict, both internal and external, that the protagonist is able to arrive at the most insightful conclusions about the nature of existence. Thus, as demonstrated in Chapter Two, the localised colonial context acts as an indispensable backdrop to the ubiquitous philosophical reflections in the novel.

Trequadrini notes that an unambiguous political stance on the nature of colonialism is absent in the novel, and is instead replaced by a moral stance - arguably not all that surprising given that Flaiano tended to shy away from defined political doctrine. This is not to contradict the critic's earlier notion of the novel being an “inverted fable”, however, as it does not necessarily follow that the presence of a moral stance indicates a desire to convey the structured morality of a traditional fable. He writes that in *Tempo di uccidere*:

Il giudizio politico non è pronunciato, è sospeso, ma viene adombrato il giudizio morale attraverso una produzione di immagini di valenza simbolica, sì che il giudizio riguarda non 'quella' guerra ma la guerra in generale, che è metafora della vita in quanto situazione tipica nella quale l'uomo [...] 'è agito' dagli eventi, è alla loro mercè e si esprime attraverso azioni cui si sente necessitato, per il vivere che non ha altro scopo che quello di vivere, uno stare nel mondo disorientato e disperato (Trequadrini, 1994: 57).

Stripped of the trappings of European society, the conflict in the barren African landscape provides an ideal (if at times threatening) space for the negotiation of the self. It is an idea which is evoked by the lieutenant in the opening chapter, when he reflects on “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” (54). This triumphant tone undergoes a transformation as the events of the plot unfold, but the symbolic value of the colonial theatre retains its significance. As Trequadrini argues, the novel reveals the effects of not only the Italo-Ethiopian war, but of all wars, on the individual.

One is reminded in *Tempo di uccidere* of the pre-eminent idea in the closing stanza of Philip Larkin's 1964 poem *MCMXIV*, “Never such innocence/ Never before or since/ As changed itself to past[...] Never such innocence again” (Forbes, 1999: 22). It is a poignant notion which is reflected in Flaiano's *Aethiopia: Appunti per una canzonetta*, in which he quotes a military song, “E poi sarà

finita/la nostra gioventù” (Flaiano, 2008: 300). Much as soldiers' experience of the horror of the First World War, the great literary war, ruptured pre-established deterministic notions of Being, so the experience of the 1935 invasion acted as a catalyst for self-revelation. This can be applied to both the fictional protagonist and to Flaiano himself who, in a 1972 interview stated, “l’Africa l’ho conosciuta e l’ho vista come un fondale a una mia personale avventura. Che poi questa personale avventura abbia coinciso anche con una guerra cui ho preso parte e che ho odiato [...] quella è stata una cosa d’importanza enorme” (as cited in Corti, 2001: 1210). Thus, for the author, it is his personal experience which takes precedence over the coinciding war, although it was of course the conflict which initially led him to Abyssinia in 1935. In much the same vein, it is the individual who takes precedence over the collective in the novel, with philosophical and moral judgement taking precedence over a more removed political critique of fascist designs on the East African country.

Flaiano presents the reader with a tragic outlook on the human condition: one which is plagued by ambiguity and ambivalence, deceit, perpetual failure and ultimately, the futile quest for an elusive sense of purpose. Shattering the illusions of our ability to control our own destiny, *Tempo di uccidere* can be read as a critique of the foundations upon which human understanding is based. Having lost a firm grip on reality, the lieutenant's inability to negotiate his way through the boundaries between actuality and illusion exposes a tragic and insurmountable weakness of the self. Claudia Quarantotto argues that this existential tragedy, namely the lieutenant's prevailing inadequacy, ultimately stems from his disconnection from reality, “il deficit etico è determinato dal deficit cognitivo, epistemologico. Difetta l'azione, perché il pensiero fa bancarotta. Chi non sa, non fa: perché il suo fare non avrebbe senso” (Quarantotto, 1994: 68). In essence, the crux of the ontological themes in the novel is here wholly encapsulated by Quarantotto's own aphorism, “Chi non sa, non fa”. A basic tenet of Pirandellian thought, the realisation of the idea that we are unable to define or know reality, and thus existence itself, is inexorably linked to a sense of individual inadequacy and meaninglessness. For Pirandello as well as for Flaiano, reality is harsh and incompatible with any form of authentic aspiration. However, the illusions which are created as an escape from this dilemma either prove deceptive or represent impossible ideals. The individual is therefore condemned to alienation and impotence (Salinari, as quoted by Gagliardi, in Pirandello, 2010: 237). The psychological and philosophical implications of this vision are applicable not only to Pirandello's Mattia Pascal in *Il Fu Mattia Pascal*, Tozzi's Pietro in *Con gli occhi chiusi* and Svevo's Zeno in *La Coscienza di Zeno*, but also to Flaiano's anonymous lieutenant. Indeed, the paradox of the metaphysical “vivo morto” (Gagliardi in Pirandello, 2010: 228), elucidated in Tozzi's “occhi chiusi” or il “saper non vivere” in *La Coscienza di Zeno*, are all distilled in the

protagonist of *Tempo di uccidere*. His dilemma, like those of his fictional predecessors, is encapsulated by don Eligio in the closing paragraphs of *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, “Intanto questo [...]che fuori della legge e fuori di queste particolarità, lieti o tristi che sieno, per cui noi siamo noi, caro signor Pascal, non è possibile vivere” (Pirandello, 2010: 212).

This section explores what could be referred to as Flaiano's “literary nostalgia”. Through placing the philosophical themes which emerge in *Tempo di uccidere* into context, and assessing the links which exist between this work and the writing of Pirandello and Svevo, for example, one can reach a deeper understanding of *why* the author is unique and *how* his “anachronistic” themes can be deemed rebellious in the age of neorealism. However, although Flaiano primarily draws on the European literary topoi of the early 20th century and the beginning of the interwar period, these themes are interwoven with an evocation of long-established and traditional literary imagery. For example, the short cut the lieutenant elects to pursue leads him geographically, psychologically and morally astray. Much like Dante in *Inferno* I, having deserted his “diritta via”, the lieutenant finds himself in a “selva oscura”, here refashioned into a “bosaglia...come in preda ad un innocuo terremoto” (44). In addition to the conspicuous allusions to Dante, the Biblical symbols of Flesh, Death and Sanctity are represented respectively by Mariam, the lieutenant's original crime (or, on an allegorical or theological level, his original sin) and Johannes (Quarantotto, 1994: 67). Indeed, the title of the novel itself is the most patent evocation of Biblical symbolism. *Tempo di uccidere* is a direct allusion to Ecclesiastes 3:3, “A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to break down and a time to build up”, a verse which encapsulates the existential journey of the protagonist whose psychological breakdown can be perceived as a regenerative experience²⁷. It is, however, not a traditional regeneration, that is to say a kind of spiritual cleansing which leads to rebuilding the self. In fact, the novel closes inconclusively, and one is not left with the impression that the lieutenant's physical and metaphorical journey has led to any form of regeneration at all. The significance of the title, therefore, could be interpreted as being almost as abstruse as the text itself. That notwithstanding, the protagonist's “regeneration” is borne out of the ultimate realisation of his weaknesses, and the resignation to his powerlessness. By acknowledging the illusions which lie at the heart of his existence and by allowing himself to be guided by self-doubt, he is finally able to confront life, even though at variance with “societal norms”.

Although seemingly contradictory, in transcending the traditional frontiers of post-1945 literature in Italy, the “anachronism” of *Tempo di uccidere* is more than a simple re-evocation or return to

²⁷ The question of the implication of the “regeneration” in the context of this novel is addressed in Chapter Five. In the context of *Tempo di uccidere*, the “regenerative” effects of the protagonist's experience do not fall into conventional structures. Rather, his regeneration lies in his resignation to his limitations and to the uncertain nature of his existence.

themes which had long fallen out of favour with his contemporaries. Flaiano, while staying true to the roots of the ontological dilemma which gave rise to the figures of the “inetto” and “malato”, adapts these concepts to a colonial setting. There is, as a consequence, a discernible shift away from the insular crisis of the bourgeoisie present in the works of Svevo or Pirandello. The author displaces a Zeno or Mattia Pascal, in this case the lieutenant, by creating an environment distant from mainstream imagination, given that the Abyssinian plateau is certainly less recognisable than the streets of Milan or Rome. To some degree, in placing the protagonist within that alluring yet threatening African “paradise”, Flaiano gives himself the freedom to distance himself from the literary milieu which preceded him. In deconstructing the various manifestations of the themes of ineptitude and malaise in *Tempo di uccidere* and assessing the respective roles they occupy within the narrative, one is able to edge closer to understanding the roots of Flaiano's intentional *difference*. It requires time, nevertheless, to appreciate Flaiano's art, and in the words of Lucilla Sergiacomo, “la sua è una grandezza da bere a piccoli sorsi, solo così si può apprezzare il sapore della sua intelligenza, l'eleganza della sua satira, la nitidezza solariana del suo stile” (Sergiacomo, as quoted in Gambacorta, 2010: 56).

The early decades of the 20th century brought about a significant change in both the socio-political and geographical space of Europe, and in the continent's cultural imagination. In literary terms, one sees a shift in focus from Verga's *verismo* or Zola's naturalism to the undermining of the Positivist tenets upon which the aforementioned literary movements were based. This open questioning of Darwinian rationalism was stimulated by a range of developments in the fields of psychoanalysis and philosophy, largely pioneered by the likes of Freud, Husserl²⁸ and Bergson. Their work on the nature of consciousness effectively shattered the rationalist framework by which, since Kant, existence had previously been understood. As De Stefanis writes, “La coscienza [...] finisce coll'essere per Husserl l'unica realtà originaria, e la natura è il risultato di di una “costituzione” che ha la sua prima radice nella coscienza (De Stefanis, 1989: 141). Much like Zeno's father in Svevo's *La Coscienza di Zeno*, whose acceptance of his own existence is a source of great frustration and perplexity for the protagonist, the writers of the early 20th century tended to be disconnected from the heavy reliance on rationalist thought which characterised their parents' generation. Corroding the roots of 19th century scientific knowledge, the advent of a relativist perspective had a consequent effect on this new literary generation. Faced with reality no longer being a static, determinable entity, they perceived life as fragmented and unknowable. It is broadly to this literary and cultural backdrop that many of the ontological reflections of Flaiano's protagonist can be traced.

²⁸ Although the development of phenomenology is largely attributed to Husserl, the focus on consciousness and conscious experience can be traced back to the ideas contained in Hegel's 1807 publication, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (translated as *Phenomenology of the Mind* or *Phenomenology of the Spirit*).

This is, of course, despite the fact that by the time of the novel's publication in 1947, the philosophical ideas which gave rise to characters such as Pirandello's Mattia Pascal, Svevo's Zeno and Tozzi's Pietro could have been viewed as rather passé.

The French philosopher Bergson, whose most iconic work is *Essais sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889), contested the Positivist notion that man and knowledge are dictated by deterministic evolutionary mechanisms. Asor Rosa writes that “per lui al centro dell'uomo c'è la coscienza. Essa vive di leggi sue proprie, non riducibili e quelle dei meccanismi naturali [...] tutta la realtà, nelle sue molteplici forme, procede da uno *slancio vitale* interno alla materia stessa, che non può essere ridotto a una spiegazione puramente razionale” (Asor Rosa, 2009: 134-5). This emphasis on exploring the irrational component of our being - our consciousness - laid the foundation for the significant developments in 20th century European literature and philosophical thought. It is from this broader tradition that works such as Mann's *Der Zauberberg*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Pirandello's *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, Borgese's *Rubé* or Svevo's *La Coscienza di Zeno* emerge, all of which are imbued with a reflection on the tragic (and at times tragicomic) nature of the human condition. These themes converge in *Tempo di uccidere*. The anonymous lieutenant's moral and psychological demise is ultimately framed by the fractured ideas of the self inspired by this age of relativism, by the *nausea* of Sartre, the ineptitude of Svevo and Tozzi, and the “fictitious reality” of Pirandello. In this way, therefore, Flaiano can be considered rebellious in his “anachronism”, looking behind the shoulders of history and revealing a certain “literary nostalgia” for past decades.

As was true of the late 19th century, developments in psychoanalysis and philosophy were dominated primarily by Italy's northern neighbours in France and in the Hapsburg Empire (until its collapse in 1918). The latter formed part of the socio-geographical and cultural space defined *a posteriori* as Mitteleuropa. Decades after the metaphorical sun set over the Adriatic Sea, ending the era of what could be called Trieste's “golden years”, the British author Jan Morris published *Trieste and the meaning of nowhere*. In the introduction to the work, she writes:

I cannot always see Trieste in my mind's eye. Who can? It is not one of your iconic cities, instantly visible in the memory or the imagination [...] It is a middle-sized, essentially middle-aged Italian seaport, ethnically ambivalent, historically confused [...] There are moments in my life, nevertheless, when a suggestion of Trieste is summoned so exactly into my consciousness that wherever I am I feel myself transported there. The sensation of it rather like those arcane moments of hush that sometimes interrupt a perfectly ordinary conversation, and are said to signify the passing of an angel [...] For me they often signal Trieste (Morris, 2001: 3).

It is, in essence, an aptly-titled work which in many ways is a testament to the vague and cultural and historical space that was once the *locus mentalis* of Italian Mitteleuropean authors. The city

acted as a crucible in which the myriad linguistic, religious and cultural influences that characterised the expansive Austro-Hungarian Empire were condensed. It is, of course, its geographical peculiarity as a meeting point of German, Slav and Italian identities which allowed for the negotiation of what is now known as a literary *triestinità*. Morris evokes the intangible, and indefinable atmosphere of the contested port city, and it is this sensation, “rather like those arcane moments of hush”, which seeps through the text of writers such as Slapater or Svevo. Given the eclectic nature of the society which saw the intersection of such diverse identities, it comes as little surprise that it harboured a profound sense of fragmentation of the individual, difference and melancholy in its authors, “Melancholy is Trieste's chief rapture [...] It is not a stabbing sort of disconsolation, the sort that makes you pine for death[...] In my own experience it is more like our Welsh *hiraeth*, expressing itself in bitter-sweetness and a yearning for we know not what” (Morris, 2001: 64). However, fragmentation of the self, marginalisation and melancholy are not restricted to the Mitteleuropean authors, and indeed emerge as central themes in the German-language works of Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (1924) or Musil *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (1930-42), and then, years later, in Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere*.

There are significant historical circumstances which led to the increased emphasis on difference (here intended to include the marginalisation of the individual) and malaise as a literary motif. Coupled with the emergence of relativism, phenomenology and psychoanalysis at the turn of the 20th century, the implosion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of the First World War added another dimension to the literary and cultural identity of an ethnically and politically fractious imperial expanse. The establishment of new borders did little to define the geopolitical space of Mitteleuropa, and indeed served to exacerbate what could be referred to as a pre-existing cultural ataxia: an identity which proved as volatile as the borders which attempted to define it. Thus, the “ethnic ambivalence” and “historical confusion” mentioned in Morris' opening paragraph are pivotal to an understanding of the literary identity of Mitteleuropa as a whole. Together with the negation of reality as an objective entity pioneered by the likes of Pirandello and Tozzi at the turn of the century, the unstable socio-political context as well the crisis of the bourgeoisie fostered a sense of an uncertain existence in Mitteleuropean authors. On a broader scale, the fluidity of cultural identity is played out in the vacuum left exposed by the decline of the Hapsburg Empire. On a literary level, however, one sees in Mitteleuropean authors the need to grapple with an inescapable feeling of *not belonging*, a reflection no doubt of the political fragility in the aftermath of the implosion the Austro-Hungarian boundaries (Pizzi, 2003: 32). It could be argued that, decades later, many of the key themes in *Tempo di uccidere* have their genesis in this period.

It is important to note that these themes are certainly not unique to the Triestine, or even Mitteleuropean territory, but they are particularly evident in the extensive literature to emerge from this area in the early 20th century. As Katia Pizzi notes, “Trieste is not to its writers what Recanati is to Leopardi or Paris is to Baudelaire, yet its influence on its writers is equally as poignant, “ ‘nata per sbaglio’, and this motto encapsulates, as if in an accidental and yet divine origin of the city, its desire for self-legitimation” (Pizzi, 2001: 33). The personified city's desire for self-legitimation is reflective of a collective consciousness of not belonging, of existing *outside* of the conventional city-state frontiers, which is transposed onto the sensitivities and perceptions of its writers. Herein lies the insular and often nostalgic concept of *triestinità*, an “invented tradition” which by its very nature “cannot but turn Trieste into a 'locus mentalis', a mental landscape, a papier-mâché landscape” (Pizzi, 2001: 33). It is from this socio-cultural and geopolitical landscape that Svevo's *Zeno* originates. His preoccupation with physical disease is transformed into a more metaphysical malaise, and his personal challenges can be seen to mirror those of the city which envelops him: a desire for self-legitimation, coupled with an unattainable need to belong. Similarly, in *Tempo di uccidere*, we see the elevation of disease to a symbolic stratum, reflecting the lieutenant's alienation, acting as a symbol of his inability to assimilate into mainstream society (or, perhaps, his choice not to do so).

In *La Coscienza di Zeno*, Zeno Cosini articulates disease as being a catalyst for a process of self-revelation, as though to be healthy is to imply an unwillingness to look directly into the eye of life, a form of blind optimism, “La salute non analizza se stessa e neppure si guarda nello specchio. Solo noi malati sappiamo qualcosa di noi stessi” (Svevo, 2010: 135). The theme of *malattia*, which is translated as *malaise* in an attempt to capture both its physical and metaphysical connotations, has undergone extensive mutations throughout the centuries of Western literature. As Gian-Paolo Biasin notes, the death of Flaubert's female protagonist, Madame Bovary, signified the end of the Romantic hero. No longer was disease treated in a “vague, indefinite, melancholic way, having often little to do with a precise bodily sickness” (Biasin, 1967: 79) but rather it became subjected to the harsh realism of 19th century Positivism, with meticulous attention paid to often cruel physical details and miserable living conditions. Indeed, the treatment of the theme of disease during the era of the French naturalists and the Italian *veristi* can be seen in relation to their understanding of the self. Relying heavily on Darwin-inspired “scientific knowledge”, disease was understood and portrayed as a physical condition, subject to the laws of nature and not to the oscillations of human consciousness. From the turn of the 20th century, however, one can consider disease as both a physical ailment as well as a manifestation of a moral or ontological weakness, encapsulated in the character of Zeno in *La Coscienza di Zeno* and years later, in Flaiano's anti-hero in *Tempo di*

uccidere. Real or imagined, the role that malaise plays in the development of these respective characters reveals an important authorial vision of existence. No longer restricted to the limited symbolism of Positivist thought, the representation of a doubt-ridden and precarious nature of reality was echoed by the ushering in of a new age of literary images. Within this context, one sees physical disease used as an objective correlative both of metaphysical weakness and of an inescapable self-perception of difference.

There is a clear connection between the literary evocations of the theme of malaise and the idea of the writer being alienated from society. This inability to assimilate inevitably leads to a prevailing sense of ineptitude. For example, Zeno's imaginary ailments are a source of stability in a society to which he can never authentically belong, and act as a symbol of his isolation. Flaiano's lieutenant's leprosy is a further extension of this inescapable feeling of difference. Much like the protagonists of the Mitteleuropean world, the lieutenant exists at the edge of society, not because of miserable living conditions or poverty (environments evoked in the *veristi* tradition), but rather because of his state of mind. While on a historical level the disease which assails him is often associated with the African sphere, in the novel it functions more as a manifestation of the lieutenant's alienation. Given the historical and literary connotations of leprosy as a disease which leads to the exclusion of its sufferers from the community, its role in Flaiano's novel stretches beyond the mere external function as revealing the realities of the colonial theatre. Indeed, it can be considered the perfect disease of *difference*. Before embarking on an analysis of the theme of malaise in the text, however, it is important to look at its complementary existential manifestation: ineptitude. While it depends on how one approaches the intertwined elements of ineptitude and malaise in the text, it is (at least in the case of *Tempo di uccidere*) the former which appears to be predominant. In other words, disease - both physical and metaphysical - emerges as a direct result of the protagonist's chronic sense of inadequacy and lack of psychological fulfillment. It is, therefore, the material manifestation of an extreme consciousness of self (Davis, 1972: 52).

As already mentioned, the literary precedents for the theme of ineptitude in Mitteleuropean literature, whether in the character of Zeno in *La Coscienza di Zeno* or Ulrich in Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, extend to pre-1900. That notwithstanding, one can essentially attribute the development in the literary figure of the "inetto" in Italian literature to the works of Svevo, Pirandello and Tozzi to the early decades of the 20th century. In subsequent years, the foundation laid down by these three authors has reappeared in works ranging from the likes of Moravia's *Gli indifferenti* to Buzzati's *Il deserto dei tartari* and, of course, in Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere*. Unlike Svevo, neither Pirandello nor Tozzi can be considered part of the Mitteleuropean literary

movement. However, the frontiers between the Mitteleuropean themes of alienation and malaise and that of ineptitude intersect. These boundaries can be broadly situated in what Biasin calls the intertextual and diachronic axis of D'Annunzio-Pirandello-Tozzi-Borgese-Svevo-Montale-Moravia, or rather Sperelli-Mattia-Remigio-Rubè-Zeno-Moscarda-Arsenio-Michele (Biasin, 1979: 184). If we extend this axis into the post-Second World War context, an ontological reading of *Tempo di uccidere* could see Flaiano and his lieutenant added to this list of canonical Italian authors and their protagonists.

While the notion of ineptitude has an extensive history in European literature, in the early 20th century there is a shift from a focus on materialist and biological causes, emphasised by the naturalist movement of the 19th century, to a focus on the irrational roots of man's ineptitude. Tozzi's notion of man with “gli occhi chiusi” emerges from the rise in phenomenology, coupled with the ideas for which Pirandello is renowned: the indefinable nature of reality, the blurred boundaries between form and content, and the fractured essence of the individual. As Robert Fiskin writes, “Underlying Pirandello's pyrotechnics is a deep pity for the man whose suffering is an outgrowth of his thought, and in whom suffering must give rise to further introspection, which perpetuates the pain” (Fiskin, 1948: 8). Captured in Pietro's reflection, “Gli altri sanno tutto di me. Io no.” (35) is the very idea of man being unable to know himself, a source not only of isolation and frustration, but also a reminder of his inadequacy. Tozzi's character “con gli occhi chiusi” does not necessarily imply a form of blindness, but rather a doubt about what it is that he sees. In the words of Eduardo Saccone:

Il mistero, la misteriosità del reale significa questo soprattutto: l'insicurezza, l'indeterminatezza dei confini – dei tratti, delle linee, dei colori, dei valori [...] il mondo, e il flusso di coscienza del protagonista tozziano [...] sembra disarticolato, privo di continuità, in preda alle più incontrollabili fluttuazioni: disancorato, senza abitudini, impulsivo e a strappi (Saccone, 1995: 5).

There is a mutually symbiotic relationship between the archetypal Tozzian character described above and the literary theme of ineptitude. Man is subject to the uncontrollable forces of nature and the constant flux of consciousness. Thus, the idea of being in control of one's destiny while simultaneously being exposed to the irrational and unpredictable elements of existence is incongruous. One sees in Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere* an inability to reconcile these two elements, trapping the protagonist between the Pirandellian, and essentially Tozzian, dialectic of *il vero* and *il verosimile*. For Tozzi's Pietro, like Pirandello's Mattia, Svevo's Zeno and Flaiano's anonymous lieutenant, the line between reality and illusion is blurred by the uncertainties of their perception. For these authors, the world is constructed. Embodying the crisis of modernity, their protagonists reflect the moral confusion precipitated by the rapid industrialisation of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Faced with the religious vacuum created by the secularisation – formal or otherwise - of society, Italian Modernism reflects the search for new meaning in a world without transcendence. In essence, these authors react to the failure of the promise of material solace. Indeed, what industrialised, modern society purported to improve only created a need for a certainty that it was unable to provide. Although these ideas are attributed to the late 19th and early 20th century authors, they are equally present in the post-1945 *Tempo di uccidere*, and no doubt remain relevant in the 21st century. They are, in essence, timeless.

The protagonist in Pirandello's 1904 *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, Mattia Pascal, says of himself “ero inetto a tutto” (Pirandello, 2010:33), while the original title of Svevo's first novel, *Una vita* (1892), was *Un inetto* (Asor Rosa, 2009: 239). Although the renowned literary “inetti” of the late 19th and early 20th century are certainly not confined to the geographical boundaries of the *stivale*, Asor Rosa argues that the theme of ineptitude in Italian literature has adopted a specific function:

Pare a me che 'inettitudine', 'inerzia', 'indifferenza' siano le categorie con cui l'Italia traduce e ammorbidisce – soprattutto nel triestino Svevo – la perentoria indicazione musiliana dell'uomo senza qualità: il dispogliamento mitteleuropeo di quanto nel protagonista è superfluo per arrivare più rigorosamente all'essenza e alla coscienza delle cose (Asor Rosa, 2009: 240).

The link between the ineptitude, inertia and indifference elucidated here by Asor Rosa finds equal expression in Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere*, in which we see repeated references to “noia”, “inerzia” and to the languid melancholy of the landscape. When considering the evocations of Pirandello, Tozzi and Svevo in Flaiano's novel, we can thus see a clear sequence of thematic links which are centred on the idea of *l'inettitudine*, of being ill-suited for life. Whether the Mitteleuropean literary traits of indifference and disease espoused by Svevo's most renowned character, the *abulia* of Tozzi's Pietro or the *folia* of Pirandello's Mattia Pascal, that which remains common to all characters is their inability to confront life according to societal expectations. That said, however, one could equally argue that this inability to confront life is actually a choice not to accept the illusions with which life is imbued. Ultimately, present in Flaiano's lieutenant's inadequacy, self-doubt and psychological ambiguities is a wide spectrum of metaphysical considerations which situate both the novel, and the “inetto” at its epicentre, firmly in the Italian, and in some respects European, literary tradition of the *Primo Novecento*.

Chapter Four

Discerning and divergent: The Narrative Voice in Tempo di uccidere

4.1 Introduction

Né vincitore né vinto, né innocente né colpevole, né malato né sano, né amato né ingannato: questa è la maschera in perpetua metamorfosi che si ottiene dalla somma degli eventi del romanzo. Il destino del tenente è segnato quindi dualisticamente dall'impossibilità sia di vincere che di perdere, sia di espiare le proprie colpe costituendosi sia di cancellarle autoassolvendosi (Sergiacomo, 1994: 37).

Forming the foundation of the chronological narrative in *Tempo di uccidere* is a chain of the lieutenant's failures, ranging from initially becoming lost in the woods in search of a short cut to unsuccessfully killing the doctor, the Major and even Johannes, all of whom appear to obstruct his path towards presumed absolution. Furthermore, the criminal charges he flees throughout the course of the novel do not come to fruition, suggesting that he is not even worthy in the eyes of the law. However, this sequence of failures which frames the lieutenant's ineptitude is ultimately his only stabilising force at this point of his life. As Maria Cristina Terrile writes of Antonio Borgese's famous "inetto", Filippo Rubè, "l'ineptitudine di Rubè rimane dall'inizio alla fine della narrazione l'unico elemento stabile della sua individualità. Il romanzo viene così a configurarsi [...] come la storia di una personalità in crisi che, in virtù del suo stesso carattere, è condannata all'immobilità" (Terrile, 1995: 43). The existential significance of Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere* can be understood along the same lines. The lieutenant, trapped between binary oppositions and overwhelmed by self-doubt, is condemned to psychological paralysis.

The progression of Flaiano's principal character does not culminate in the defeat of inadequacy, nor the casting aside of his doubts, nor a new-found ability to confront life, as it were. Rather, if indeed there is any progression at all to be traced in the novel, it lies in the anti-hero's acceptance of his fate. Paralysed by pervasive uncertainty, he is left with two options: resignation or death. His attempts at suicide rendered unsuccessful, the protagonist's consequent resignation to his powerlessness and his acceptance of his marginalisation is possibly the only way he is able to manifest his "strength". Thus, paradoxically, it is only through inaction that he is able to assert individual agency. However, it is worth noting that the themes of ineptitude and malaise are not restricted solely to an ontological reading of the text. Indeed, the ambivalent tone which characterises the socio-historical narrative is inspired by the protagonist's inability to commit to the ideals of the fascist colonial endeavour, or to the protection of – at least on an ideological level – the cause of the colonised (Sergiacomo, 1994: 36). This inability to commit can be then further amplified, revealing a Svevian unwillingness to commit to life itself. Ineptitude, therefore, is the common thread which unites the two principal intersecting narratives.

The interwoven themes of ineptitude and malaise are evoked from the very outset of the novel, with a toothache providing the pretext for the protagonist's journey, and a wrong turn leading him into the “alberi verdi, sempre gli stessi alberi abbastanza maledetti” (32) of the plateau. In the same way that disease is understood as a physical manifestation of a metaphysical dilemma, so the landscape is transformed into a blank canvas onto which the internal struggles of the protagonist are projected. Thus, not only does the narrative technique reflect the doubt which is so central to the characterisation of the lieutenant, but the landscape itself is also often portrayed as hostile and melancholic, mirroring his psychological state. Physical spaces are hence also refashioned into reflections of his degeneration. One sees a similar mechanism in Tozzi's *Con gli occhi chiusi*, in which Pietro's oppressive state of mind is reflected in the descriptions of the landscape. Saccone notes that houses, for example, are “oscure e deserte”, and rooms are “senz'aria” (Saccone, 1995: 2). The allegorical function of the description of the landscape or environment is common to both Tozzi and Flaiano, along with a host of other authors. In Saccone's reading *Con gli occhi chiusi*, much as in Terrile's reading of *Rubé*, we see a critique which is equally applicable to Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere*. He argues that “l'evidenza della descrizione, la sua *enargeia* è non solo funzionale, com'è ovvio, ma si carica di un senso che va ben oltre la lettera. La determinatezza dei particolari copre l'astrattezza o generalità del conflitto” (Saccone, 1995: 2). In Flaiano's novel, similar attention to detail, coupled with extensive repetition of both images and words, directs our attention not only towards the significance of the physical landscape but also to what it comes to represent: *l'astrattezza o generalità del conflitto*.

The binary opposition of light and dark, both in the descriptions of day and night and in the repeated references to shadows, is manipulated to reflect the lieutenant's internally contested battle as he wrestles with guilt, *ennui*, and an ineluctable feeling of both literal and metaphorical entrapment. Nights, for example, are imbued with a sense of melancholy and desperation, acting as a daily echo of his inadequacy and of his inability to control fate. He reflects that “sempre al tramonto mi assaliva quella sfiducia, quel presentimento di morte e la certezza che era inutile lottare. Lo seguii in silenzio, come un prigioniero” (161) and “Non avrei più risalito l'affluente, quel giorno. Già il sole declinava e la malinconia della sera si anticipava nello scolorire delle montagne. 'Non uscirò mai da questa valle' pensai. 'Nessuno vuole che io esca da questa valle’” (208). The sun, that archetypal image of the African landscape, plays a pivotal role in defining the relationship between physical circumstances and the lieutenant's cast of mind. It is the source of the oppressive heat from which there is little respite, and yet his feelings of anxiety and desolation are heightened by the cloud of darkness which falls upon the landscape, and consequently over him, after sunset. The role of the sun, therefore, is as contested as the other elements of the novel – be they characters,

relationships or patterns of behaviour. It, too, is subject to the fluctuations in the protagonist's perceptions.

The psychological effect of the landscape is not solely restricted to the lieutenant, however, as it also extends to his description of his fellow soldiers, whom, he imagines “fossero stati fermati dal calar della sera, incapaci di vincere la solitudine che li avrebbe attesi nella pianura ancora macabra, dove l'agguato non era più gli uomini ma delle cose, delle piante, delle ombre” (89). The use of such evocative language is instrumental in creating a suffocating atmosphere which recalls the experience of his perpetual self-questioning. Perhaps the most significant link between the external, physical environment and his psychological condition lies in his overwhelming feeling of entrapment. This metaphorical incarceration includes the memory of both Mariam and his wife, and is further extended to his immediate surroundings. In the opening chapter, for example, he says “conobbi la tristezza del prigioniero che vede giungere la sera e non è più capace di ridere” (94). The recurrent motif of the prisoner is key, for in the protagonist's attempt to avoid being apprehended and potentially imprisoned as a result of his crimes, he becomes enslaved not only to the memory of Mariam but also, most significantly, to himself. This psychological enslavement thus forms the crux of the novel as a whole. The lieutenant is, metaphorically speaking, a prisoner, and we see this incarceration transposed onto the landscape which surrounds him. This is illustrated further when he is looking out onto his infinite and inimical surroundings, and says “In fondo vedevo stagliarsi le montagne della mia prigionia, ma infinitamente più piccole e magre” (89) and “Ecco, di quella terra non sarei mai riuscito a vincere l'orrore della notte, quando il mondo sembrava rotolare nel buio...” (222). There exist, therefore, multiple layers of imprisonment: the Abyssinian landscape, the lieutenant's disease, the memory of his wife and the guilt over his initial crime. As the plot develops, the walls of these myriad prisons become increasingly difficult to break down, ultimately converging and culminating in the most enduring incarceration: that of his conscience and consciousness.

Here, Lucilla Sergiacomo's comprehensive work on Flaiano and on *Tempo di uccidere*, specifically her paper on the theme of ineptitude, is particularly relevant. Given that critical work on the ontological narrative of the novel has been relatively limited, Sergiacomo's article “Il tema dell'ineptitudine in *Tempo di uccidere*” is used in this thesis as a broader theoretical framework for a deeper investigation into philosophical themes. The critic outlines the diverse ways in which the theme of ineptitude manifests itself throughout the course of the plot. These range from the image of the effete intellectual, the coward with the incapacity to understand, the dichotomous relationship (or rather, opposition) of the “inetto-forte”, to the role of the narrative technique which

she refers to as *alternanza*: “un continuo andirivieni di pensieri del narratore protagonista a cui fa da doppio la componente spaziale di un susseguirsi ciclico dei movimenti che sempre riportano l'inetto ai luoghi di partenza” (Sergiacomo, 1994: 41). This chapter expands on Sergiacomo’s work on the effect of narrative “alternanza”, looking at the text in further detail and assessing the efficacy of this technique in conveying the philosophical perspective of the novel.

4.2 Narrative perspectives

Ciò desta la mia stupefazione ancora adesso che ne scrivo, dopo che ho avuto il tempo di pensarci per tanta parte della mia vita (Svevo, 2010: 281).

Both *La Coscienza di Zeno* and *Tempo di uccidere* are written from the perspective of a first-person narrator looking back on his past experiences from a temporal, emotional and spatial distance. Just as in the citation from Svevo's most famous work where one sees the interruption of the past with the use of the present tense, so in Flaiano's novel the sporadic appearance of the present tense reminds the reader of the retrospective narrative which frames the plot. The past, in effect, is rendered more immediate by intermittent use of the present tense. This conveys a continuity of themes, suggesting that the work is not bound by a specific time-frame or historical context. Furthermore, while neither *La Coscienza di Zeno* nor *Tempo di uccidere* are autobiographical works (although both have discernible autobiographical links), the effect of this retrospection on the invented characters of Zeno and the anonymous lieutenant is marked. It evokes the notion, however illogical, of a “fictitious autobiography”, subject to a greater or lesser extent to the same critical framework applied to the authentic version of the literary form. In other words, as is the case with autobiographies, the credibility of the narrator is frequently undermined by hints of self-censorship.

Mario Lavagetto's reading of the autobiographical formula in *La Coscienza di Zeno* is arguably equally applicable to *Tempo di uccidere*. He says of the narrative structure in Svevo's novel that it is “[...] 'Un'autobiografia e non la mia': la formula è brillante e richiama alla mente la definizione del romanzo come autobiografia del possibile oppure, senza indulgere in frequentatissimi e iniqui paragoni, quella di Proust: *Je qui n'est pas (ou je n'est pas toujours) moi* (Lavagetto in Svevo, 1987: 9). Using this formula as a foundation, it is clear that in the case of both *La Coscienza di Zeno* and *Tempo di uccidere* the narration is inevitably filtered through the subjectivity of the frequently deceptive first-person narrator. As a result of this narrative technique, the reader enters into direct contact with what Dedola calls the “autoinganno della coscienza”. We are not only allowed entry into the realm of the respective protagonists' actions, but also into the mechanisms of their mental processes and the contradictions which define them (Dedola, 1992: 26). Moreover, if we amplify our discussion to include Tozzi and Pirandello, we see that although *Gli occhi chiusi* is narrated from a third person perspective, Tozzi's notion of a “vita interiore” is also relevant to the first-person “inetti” of Svevo's Zeno, Flaiano's lieutenant and Pirandello's Mattia Pascal. Common to all four of these iconic protagonists is this “vita interiore” of which Dedola writes, the “mondo interiore, inspiegabile, sconvolto dalla sofferenza e dal dolore, senza fondo e privo di prospettiva,

[che] è l'unica dimensione che resta all'individuo" (Dedola, 1992: 28). As a logical progression from the notion of both a "fictitious autobiography" and a split first-person narrator with distinct voices, the focus turns here for a moment to the role of time.

Since time is an interminable and indeterminable force, one can deduce, as John Freccero does, "that the past exists in the present, and moves with it into the future. This continuous chain is life itself, and consciousness is the present moment, the spearhead of the past thrust into the future" (Freccero, 1962: 4). With this in mind, one could contend that the two discernible voices are in fact simultaneously one entity, enveloping the past, present and the future of the central character. As the protagonist reflects, "Il tempo è indivisibile come un sentimento, pensavo. Che significa un anno, un mese, un'ora, quando la vera misura è in me stessa?" (34). In *La Coscienza di Zeno*, in a futile attempt to stop smoking, Zeno obsessively ascribes significance to dates, which prove to be nothing more than a source of structure and stability in a world which is inherently unstable and beyond his control. Time, however, serves as an external and illusory means of grappling with a psychological and ontological reality. In essence, it is this idea which is evoked by Flaiano's aphorism, and indeed by the absence of an unambiguous definition of real time in *Tempo di uccidere*. Although bound by a linear progression in the novel (i.e the chronological events of the plot), there is an eternal aspect to his consciousness, which is as *indivisibile* as the structured mechanisms of time itself.

Through subverting the apparent objective reality of a third person narrator (although for Flaiano, much like Pirandello, reality can never be considered objective), the author forces the reader automatically to question, and even to undermine, the credibility of the protagonist's perspective and thoughts. As is evident in Flaiano's vision, this is an indictment of the supposedly objective "truth" or "realism" that his contemporaries sought to convey in film and literature. Indeed, it is an indictment which is rendered all the more powerful in the scepticism, or even antirealism, of *Tempo di uccidere*. The author, in using a first-person narrator whose ideas, thoughts and actions are frequently inconsistent, conveys the very concept that reality is as indefinable and unstable as is his protagonist, and is thus to be treated with equal distrust. The act of delving into the subjective dimension of conscious experience creates, as Dedola argues, "una nuova dimensione [che] viene così sbalzata in primo piano, una realtà sotterranea fatta da pulsioni, desideri, allucinazioni, sogni, in cui regnano sovrani la contraddizione e il paradosso" (Dedola, 1992: 23). Although this citation is pertinent within the context of the novel, it is worth noting that Dedola's article is in fact not on *Tempo di uccidere*. Entitled "Il fumo, la maschera, gli insetti: crisi del romanzo e nuove proposte in Svevo, Pirandello e Tozzi", the relevance of the article is further indication of the extent to which

these authors' philosophical perspectives materialise decades later in *Tempo di uccidere*, thus reinforcing the notion of Flaiano's "literary nostalgia".

The interjection of the present tense with the dominant past tense in the narrative, coupled with the extensive use of parentheses, serves to emphasise the presence of the second voice - that is, the voice which is blessed with the value of hindsight. As we have already seen in the socio-historical narrative, this second voice allows the narrator-protagonist to place himself above the impervious judgements of his younger self. Anna Longoni argues that it is as if "il narratore interno avesse necessità in inserire "a parte", delle postille a latere, l'espressione di un dubbio proprio là dove si scopre che non possono essere date spiegazioni" (Longoni, 1994: 33). This is illustrated by examples such as "La donna era agonizzante (non mi si venga a dire che poteva essere salvata, mi rifiuterò sempre di crederlo)" (64) and "Ecco (ricordo che pensai questo)" (42). The intervention of the narrator's voice moves between casting doubt over the protagonist's statements, as in the case of the first citation, and legitimising or lending authenticity to his memory, as in the case of the second citation. This element of retrospection intensifies the portrayal of the fragmented protagonist. It fuels his psychological oscillations; the realisations of his older self are imposed onto his younger self, and herein lies his self-doubt and the frustrating and painful realisation of his inadequacy.

As established, in looking back on his past through the relatively transparent spectacles of the present, the narrator finds more freedom in imposing criticism and judgement onto his younger self, exposing his weaknesses, uncertainty and self-delusion. Moreover, he essentially invites the reader to share in his self-denunciation. It is for this reason that one encounters the divergent perspectives, and the "alternanza" of which Sergiacomo writes, founded in the discontinuity between intention and action. She argues that:

il continuo vagabondaggio della mente del protagonista [che] revisiona e contraddice in perpetuo quando pochi istanti prima era apparso il sentimento più naturale, l'emozione più coerente, la decisione più conveniente, l'azione più giusta. L'altalena interiore tra una prima scelta A e un'alternativa B, che assume di un moto pendolare, ha riscontro nel perpetuo girovagare del protagonista tra gli stessi luoghi (Sergiacomo, 1994: 41).

The "alternanza" in Flaiano's narrative technique appears in a range of guises. In fact, it is the primary amalgamating force which stretches from the micro-level of a contradictory statement to the broader ambiguity inherent in the novel. Common to all the manifestations of "alternanza" is the often cryptic and discordant ambience which is created as a result of the infinite "vagabondaggio", of which the lieutenant is a personification. Trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle of moral and physical degradation, his inadvertent yet inescapable continual return to the same locations mirrors his psychological indecision - his mental opacity, as it were. However, this circularity is not the

only discernible narrative movement in the novel, as a linear progression is also evident through the protagonist's chronological journey. The intersection of the chronological and the circular narratives is also where much of the ontological ambiguity of the novel lies: an ambiguity which reflects the uncertainty of that which is lived and perceived. As Castaldo attests, “l'interrogarsi esistenziale proceda in Flaiano di pari passo con una struttura narrativa elaborata: quanto più questa si complica di *omissis*, frammentismo, *mise en abime*, tanto più il lettore viene sollecitato allo svelamento delle ambiguità narrative e del senso ultimo di storia-vita” (Castaldo, 2006: 466).

4.2.1 “Alternanza” and the theme of ineptitude: narrative ambiguity and individual inadequacy in *Tempo di uccidere*

Per mitigare la mia fuga, cercai un pretesto, ma era un cattivo pretesto (26).

At the beginning of the opening chapter, abandoning his fellow soldier at the overturned bus (this is to become one of a series of abandonments), the protagonist states: “Per mitigare la mia fuga cercai un pretesto, ma era un cattivo pretesto” (26). From the very outset of *Tempo di uccidere*, the lieutenant’s need to find a pretext emerges as a central element of the plot. With this initial pretext he descends into a web of continual excuses, *alla Svevo*, often riddled with doubt, in his search for expiation. He does, however, seem to be conscious of using pretexts, which are often simply feeble excuses, to perpetuate the illusions upon which his existence is based. While this heavy reliance on these specious pretexts or excuses might seem to the reader to be at best naïve or at worse disingenuous, it is central to the narrative “alternanza”. It serves to highlight both the discontinuity between intention and action as well as the protagonist's need to seek ever-elusive self-justification. It would appear that often it is fear which drives this relentless reliance on pretexts. We see, for example, his fear of wasting one of the four days he was given in order to find a dentist, his fear of Mariam's grave being discovered, his fear of the doctor exposing his leprosy and his fear of being denounced for desertion, murder and attempted murder. Irrespective of the case or context, the primary sense which comes to light through his efforts to find absolution is that excuses become a means of retrospectively trying to explain or understand the decisions he made. In other words, they form part of his attempt to assuage his questions of conscience.

Although “dovevo andarmene” is certainly a conspicuous leitmotiv in the novel, it is the extensive repetition of “dovevo” which warrants attention. In keeping with the ambiguous foundation fostered by Flaiano's narrative technique, the significance of “dovevo” varies according to the context in which it is placed. Although always implying a sense of self-imposed duty and introspection, the meaning of “il dover andarmene” or “il dover trovare un pretesto” tends to be dependent on the consequent action. For example, when the subsequent action is the *opposite* of the expressed intention, this sense of duty is undermined by doubt, underlining the inability of the protagonist to follow through on his initial objectives. In the encounter between the doctor and the lieutenant, for example, this need to find a pretext converges with the repetition of the self-imposed “dovevo”, alerting the reader to the fact that what the protagonist *should* have done, or rather *was obliged to* do, does not necessarily correlate with what he *did* do:

Non sarei restato molto tempo, il tempo di sapere, di chiedergli un libro. Ma bisognava trovare un pretesto[...] Però dovevo trovare un pretesto [...] Dovevo trovare un argomento [...] Ma non potevo andarmene (153-154).

By this stage of the novel, the reader is well acquainted with the lieutenant's incapacity to follow through on his supposed initial intentions, and so we are aware that the statement “Non sarei restato molto tempo” is likely to be undermined by a contrasting action: an extended visit. In much the same vein, the thread of “dovevo andarmene” signals the infinite contradictions which plague the lieutenant's consciousness, for the statement is almost always followed by the contrary action: remaining. It is in the penultimate chapter of the novel, *La Capanna Migliore*, that the meaning of the repeated and unfulfilled resolutions of “dovevo andarmene” is most marked. The lieutenant, aware that he is an intruder, makes repeated and determined decisions to leave Johannes's village and his stay, initially intended to last a matter of days, extends to almost six weeks. Evidently, at the core of these failed intentions lies the trap from which the Italian cannot flee: that of his insuperable ineptitude.

This cycle of contradictions, of actions following opposing intentions, is one of the paramount tenets at the heart of what one could call the internal “alternanza”. By “internal”, it is implied that the “alternanza” is played out in the lieutenant's mind as opposed to being reflected externally (such as in his inadvertent continual return to the place of his original crime). The Svevian echoes are clear. The lieutenant's unfulfilled intentions recall Zeno's unfulfilled resolutions to stop smoking, which act as a means of revealing his weakness, undermining and eroding the concept of free will. For Zeno, while his ineptitude is rooted at its most essential level in his inability to free himself of his addiction, the meaning of the “last cigarette” is ultimately metaphysical: it is a symbol of continuity in existence (Davis, 1972: 52). Similarly, the meaning of the unfulfilled resolutions which characterise Flaiano's lieutenant extend far beyond simply revealing his inadequacy. They are, in essence, his “last cigarettes”, as much of a symbol of continuity as they are of the fractured facets of his psyche.

The resolutions of Flaiano's protagonist perform both a structural and ontological function, and are intricately intertwined with his relentless pursuit for self-justification. Indeed, as Sergiacomo writes:

Il narratore svela continuamente al lettore le sue emozioni, i sentimenti, gli impulsi e subito dopo l'azione si svolge in disaccordo con le premesse o fortemente contrastata da altre considerazioni. Si verifica così uno scarto rivelatorio tra intenzione e azione: la motivazione dei comportamenti del protagonista risale ad elementi strutturali della sua personalità, che sovrastano o comunque condizionano le prime dichiarate (Sergiacomo, 1994: 41).

The extent to which one could contend that Sergiacomo's "scarto rivelatorio" can be seen as emerging as a result of what we can call a "scarto narrativo", created by the presence of two discernible voices within the first-person narration, is open to debate. Indeed, perhaps it is through the distinction between that which can be considered a "narrative" self and an "active", soldier self that the nebulous area of the concept of a single narrator with two distinct voices can be best understood. Making a distinction between the voices is far easier when looking at the colonial narrative. In that case, the contradictory statements not only serve to reinforce the ambivalent socio-historical vision conveyed by the protagonist, but also reflect the passage of time. His "enlightened" perspective is, to a degree, a product of the benefit of that which historians know is the only dangerous illusion of twenty-twenty vision: hindsight (Graham, 2005: 18).

Expanding on Sergiacomo's concept of a "scarto rivelatorio", there appear to be three different ways in which this narrative disjuncture manifests itself in the text. These all contribute to portraying a sense of the lieutenant's precarious ethical and psychological framework, his unabated self-questioning and most significantly, his perpetual incapacity to "succeed at life" according to accepted societal norms. Firstly, there is the effect of the insertion of parentheses, at times in the present tense, which Longoni argues creates a sense of the narrator adding a thought "a parte", casting a shadow of doubt over his original contemplation (Longoni, 1994: 33). For example, we see reflections such as "Il cielo era denso di stelle e, a tratti, in quel silenzio sentivo (o mi sembrava di sentire), il fruscio dell'affluente" (222), or "l'uomo (ma era poi un uomo o la distanza che ci ingannava?)" (33). Secondly, and perhaps most frequently, we see narrative contradictions embedded in the protagonist's interior monologue. These often form part of a stream of consciousness and are hence entrenched in specific time frame, namely when the events themselves either took place or *were imagined* to have taken place. In these instances, there is little or no evidence of an interjection of a wiser, older self. Lastly, at times it appears as though the contradictions in the text are a result of the hindsight of the second narrative voice, through which the protagonist seeks to denigrate his inadequate self, to justify his decisions or to convince himself of having fallen victim to circumstances beyond his control. While the boundaries between these three mechanisms of textual "alternanza" shift and overlap, all are used as means to further reinforce the themes of doubt and uncertainty. The focus here is placed on the second and third manifestations of "scarto rivelatorio", as the effect of the narration "a parte" has already been addressed in the introduction to this chapter²⁹.

29 See pg. 58

The narrative in the novel contains elements of a stream of consciousness style, and there are certain instances in which the protagonist's interior monologue mirrors the mode made famous by the likes of James Joyce and William Faulkner. The lieutenant captures his thoughts *in the moment in which they occurred*, and they are hence untainted by what he now (from his position of retrospection) knows to be “true”. Understandably, these are nuances to which the reader is often alerted by the presence of rhetorical questions. Rhetorical questions, which are abundant in the text, underscore the sense of psychological urgency and persistent self-interrogation, caused by the protagonist's frustration with the universal inability to control destiny. This is illustrated in the chapter entitled *Il dente*, during an exotic-erotic encounter which sees the lieutenant and the Major entering the house of two Abyssinian women, when he says:

Perché ero in quella casa? Che c'ero capitato a fare? Quando la lingua toccò l'incavo ancora sensibile della gengiva, rammentai tutto e conobbi la tristezza del prigioniero che vede giungere la sera e non è più capace di ridere. Il giorno è finito, domani si ricomincia, e l'unica speranza era forse quella lettera nella tenda del postino [...] Raggiungere quella lettera, anche subito! Ma i camion erano fermi e gli autisti dormivano col fucile al fianco. E poi...avrei ripreso la via del fiume e delle montagne? “No” dissi “all'alba verso l'Asmara e al diavolo ancora le conseguenze (94).

The juxtaposition of the present tense, “Il giorno è finito, domani si ricomincia” with the imperfect and *passato remoto* in this excerpt sees both the reader and the narrator catapulted into the ruminations of his consciousness. In these instances, we are transported with the protagonist on his process of self-discovery. The consequent oscillations and contradictions are typical of an interior monologue (or internal dialogue). As is to be expected of an evolution of thought, the conclusion of his stream of consciousness is frequently the antithesis of what was initially imagined or stated, *viz* a contradiction which perpetuates the psychological ambiguity and narrative “alternanza” in the text. Additionally, this extract also contains the resolute, but also remarkably transparent declaration “al diavolo ancora le conseguenze”, a phrase which appears at other occasions in the novel, namely “vada al diavolo la rispettabilità” (66) and “E al diavolo le conseguenze” (89). Although these resolutions imply a degree of agency, they also require a modicum of courage. The transparency of this repeated construction lies in the tacit understanding established between the lieutenant and the reader. Both are cognisant of the artificial nature of this bold announcement, which is nothing more than an attempted affirmation of a strength which remains eternally abstract and unattainable for the perpetually weak “inetto”.

In the opening chapter of the novel, after accidentally shooting and severely injuring Mariam, see the stream of consciousness narrative style intersects with a simultaneous glimpse of retrospection. This is characterised by the second narrative voice, looking back with hindsight:

Ero veramente arrabbiato, ma già una domanda si insinuava a turbarmi: cosa avrei fatto? Era una domanda suggerita dall'ansia, che non volevo confessarmi, di uscire presto da quel pasticcio. Dovevo soccorrela, non c'è dubbio. Ma come? Cosa si fa quando una donna muore e siete sperduto nella più buia notte dell'anno, tra ombre ostili, in una terra che ha già logorato i vostri nervi, e che odiate con tutta l'anima? Pensai che dovevo andarmene, abbandonarla (62).

Throughout the course of the plot, the protagonist is continually at odds with the memory of Mariam, or rather with what she represents – his original crime. Mariam's death, as we know, is the genesis of his turmoil. The incident underscores the arbitrary nature of destiny: a series of unplanned, seemingly trivial decisions (barring the decision to end her suffering by killing her), has ripped the protagonist from the ostensible comfort of a “known” existence and forced him to interrogate “life” and his place within it. Evident in this extract is the foundation for future narrative oscillations, coupled once again with the prevalent use of rhetorical questions. While his initial reaction is to come to her aid, “Dovevo soccorrerla, non c'è dubbio”, he appears to become overwhelmed by the circumstances in which he finds himself, leading consequently to the overt negation of his original instinct, “Pensai che dovevo andarmene, abbandonarla”. His attempt at self-justification for this paradoxical conclusion is contained in the desperate appeal to the reader to empathise with his plight, “Cosa si fa quando una donna muore [...] in una terra che ha già logorato i vostri nervi, e che odiate con tutta l'anima?” Although easily reflective of the protagonist's state of mind *at the time of the event*, this appeal has clearly been refined and articulated by the passage of time. One can therefore argue that the contradictions inherent in this passage could, in fact, be read as the result of either (or both) the second and the third manifestations of the “scarto rivelatorio”. On one hand, the rapid shift from expressing a desire to help his victim to insisting upon leaving her forms part of his interior monologue (or dialogue). The narrative reflection of the conflict between what he wants to do and what he does or is able to do is the corollary of his stream of consciousness or reasoning process. On the other hand, however, one could also contend that we see here the recognition of the effects that time has had on the lieutenant's consciousness, as his “narrative” voice guides him to a realisation that proved elusive to his “active” voice as a lieutenant, “Era una domanda suggerita dall'ansia, che non volevo confessarmi, di uscire presto da quel pasticcio”.

The aforementioned extract is one of many which are scattered across the text in the first chapter, as the protagonist seeks the most ideal way, on a practical, moral and psychological level, of dealing with his injured victim. Paramount to the events which follow from this initial act is the fact that the lieutenant chooses neither of his original solutions: he does not make a serious effort to administer any medical aid nor does he abandon Mariam (Sergiacomo, 1994: 42). The mental process which leads him to this decision is certainly not without the usual doubt which infuses the text. He says,

for example, “Ora che non la vedevo, il pensiero di abbandonarla si fortificò. Dovevo abbandonarla [...] Oppure dovevo restare, accettare tutte le responsabilità” (66) and “se, tornando, avessimo trovata lei morta, tra i corvi, dovevo accettare la colpa di averla uccisa [...] ora dovevo pagarne le conseguenze” (66). However, typical of Flaiano's narrative technique, this surprising clarity of vision and conscience is undermined just a paragraph later, and he finally reaches a decisive conclusion, “Dovevo ucciderla. Molte ragioni mi consigliavano di ucciderla, tutte egualmente forti. Dovevo finirla e nascondere il cadavere” (67). Torn between the moral duty to aid her and the selfish desire to abandon her, the protagonist devises a third solution: killing her. In so doing, he is freed, at least superficially so, from the pain of having to watch her endure further suffering. At the same time, Sergiacomo notes that in killing her, he is able to abandon Mariam while evading “le noiose conseguenze processuali che avrebbero ritardato il suo ritorno in Italia e offeso sua moglie” (Sergiacomo, 1994: 42). Nonetheless, this illusion of freedom is temporary, and in evading the “noiose conseguenze”, the protagonist ultimately becomes embroiled in a far more complicated set of conditions, as he is held captive by his conscience.

In closing, combined with the persistent use of rhetorical self-questioning, the plethora of contradictions in the text enhances the characterisation of the narrator-protagonist. The effect of the split first-person narrator, between the “narrative self” and the “active self”, suffuses the text with ambiguity, while the interweaving of paradoxes into the narration results in the questioning of any notion of an “objective truth”. This indefinability of truth or “objective reality” echoes the elevation of the subjective self at the expense of a would-be objective self, an essentially anti-Positivist stance. Thus, the technique of “alternanza” reflects the state of mind of the protagonist. It is from this foundation that the remaining illustrations of recondite representations, recurring places, uncontrollable fate and the lieutenant’s inadequacy come to light. Therefore, it is at this point that our attention turns to the most lucid example of “alternanza”: the contradictions which characterise the protagonist's coming to terms with the figure of Mariam and with what she represents.

4.2.2 A victim, a traitor, a pillar of strength? Contradictory representation and narrative ambiguity in the depiction of Mariam in *Tempo di uccidere*

Ogni volta che il mio pensiero tornava a Mariam, dovevo frenare sulle labbra l'insulto che il rancore mi dettava. Ero giunto, un giorno, a compiacermi di averla uccisa, risparmiandole così la sorte degli altri abitanti del villaggio; ora mi rimproveravo persino quella pietà postuma. E poi, dicevo, non l'avrebbero uccisa [...] mi compiaccio di averla uccisa. Lei aveva ucciso me; e senza quella malaugurata – anzi, provvida – bestia, il suo delitto sarebbe ora impunito [...] (245).

In conjunction with what was later to become Flaiano's signature literary style - the use of aphorisms and seemingly disconnected fragments – the prevalence of contradictory thoughts and statements reinforces the ambiguity which shapes the lieutenant's response to the world. Furthermore, it is also another indication of the *sui generis* nature of Flaiano's work within the context of post-1943 Italian neorealism. On the surface the novel could arguably be read in line with the neorealist tradition, since it is set during a specific historical event and is bestrewn with sparse language and stark imagery. This is, however, as far as a neorealist reading of the novel can be applied. A closer analysis of the text indubitably reveals “la struttura del viaggio alla ricerca del senso dell'esistenza; il tema dell'ineffabilità, la ricorrenza espressiva del taccuino d'appunti, del frammento e del diario: il senso dell'assurdo e la casualità degli eventi; la presenza di un narratore intradiegetico e ancora, l'intertestualità e la metanarratività, in assoluta contrapposizione ai moduli neorealisti contemporanei” (Castaldo, 2006: 466).

Given that killing Mariam is the event which provides the backdrop for the lieutenant's figurative (and literal) journey, it is not surprising that his victim plays a significant role throughout *Tempo di uccidere*. Recalling Dostoevsky's protagonist, Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*, who is forced to come to terms with its initial unconscionable act of homicide, the lieutenant in Flaiano's novel is overwhelmed by his guilty conscience as a result of his crime. Nevertheless, unlike Raskolnikov, the lieutenant does not decide to kill Mariam as a matter of principle per se. Setting aside the socio-historical symbolism of the homicide, addressed in Chapter Two, it is worth noting that he kills Mariam out of mercy, and it is not a premeditated act of aggression. That said, the psychological consequences of this act as the plot develops are not dissimilar from those which plague Dostoevsky's protagonist. Both characters become increasingly entangled in the web of their conscience in their quest for salvation. Raskolnikov enjoys the absolution which comes as a result of punishment, with *Crime and Punishment* closing with a message of regeneration, “But now a new history commences: the story of the gradual renewing of a man, of his slow progressive regeneration, and change from one world to another – an introduction to the hitherto unknown

realities of life” (Dostoevsky, 1994: 432). Flaiano’s Italian lieutenant is not granted the same possibility of absolution. Having attempted to evade the authorities throughout the course of the novel, at its close he is faced with indifference. This is reinforced by the marked use of repetition, with hints of perplexed disbelief, when he says, “Rinunciavo ai miei complici, non lieto di spiare, ma stanco di attendere [...] E nessuno mi cercava, non c’erano denunce contro di me [...] Non c’erano denunce [...] Dunque, nessuno mi cercava” (274). He is thus condemned to being always burdened by the weight of his conscience, to being forever incapable of escaping that recurring odour of the Abyssinian landscape, a constant reminder of his guilt. Indeed, aptly it is with this image that the novel ends, “Una pessima pomata, che il caldo di quella valle faceva dolciastra [...] Affrettai il passo, ma la scia di quel fetore mi precedeva” (285).

The inversion of the traditional power relations between the conqueror and colonised occurs after the erotic encounter, and while Mariam's power cannot actively be asserted, her death determines his actions henceforth. From this point onwards, the reader is able to trace the fluctuations in the representation of the indigenous woman, as the protagonist descends into a psychological vortex, convinced that she has infected him with leprosy. The notion of disease as an instrument not only of physical but also of metaphysical change, of a multifaceted *malaise*, is hereby introduced. The sores which appear on the lieutenant's hands function as a catalyst for his psychological degeneration. Indeed, it is through his experience of disease that he enters into a state of war with himself, while also being figuratively at war with his Abyssinian victim. This constant struggle for power, albeit in a rather abstract sense, hence sees Mariam refashioned from a victim into a traitor (Sergiacomo, 1994: 44). However, the metamorphosis to which the Abyssinian woman is subjected is not simply a consequence of the lieutenant's fear over having contracted leprosy. It is also a result of his progressively more tenuous grip on reality, or rather his feeling of losing control, of being unavoidably pulled by the spiralling forces of fate.

In Chapter Two, we established that the exotic-erotic encounter which frames the opening chapter of *Tempo di uccidere* sees the description of Mariam often falling into the trope of typical exoticist discourse (although not to the extent that one might find in his contemporary Giovanni Comisso). By now, it is apparent that Mariam's hold over the lieutenant is due to that which she represents: his original sin, the punishment of which is the disease which in theory assails him. Furthermore, she is a reminder of his inadequacy: she represents a possibility of happiness that is beyond the reach of the “inetto”, and he envies her knowledge of “duemila anni” which proves elusive to the inept, European lieutenant (Sergiacomo, 1994: 48).

The choice of language used to depict Mariam is also indicative of his internal struggle. Since she is deceased and therefore holds no direct agency within the context of the plot, her depiction can only be the result of the lieutenant's unstable state of mind. The power struggle which we see in the text is made explicit, for example by "Ah, Mariam, hai vinto tu,' dicevo, 'io ti ho liberata da un peso e tu l'hai messo sulle mie spalle. È talmente uno scherzo riuscito che non vale arrabbiarsi. Accettiamolo sino in fondo"(145). Now convinced that the white turban worn by his victim on the day of his crime was in fact the commonly accepted sign of her being an "untouchable", the protagonist declares her victorious for having knowingly infected him with certain death. In the extract cited below he is transported back to his encounter with Mariam by a "fiato". This, along with the motif of the "fetore" in the depiction of landscape, recurs at key moments in the novel, consistently re-evoking the painful and disquietening memory of his crime. Once more the language is a reflection of the battle that the lieutenant fights against Mariam (and thus against himself):

Non era un fetore, ma un quasi impercettibile fiato, che mi rammentava qualcosa [...] Ma questo era un fiato più insopportabile perché mi sembrava inesistente, un messaggio che io solo dovessi percepire. Era un messaggio di vittoria, un fiato baldanzoso, finalmente il grido di trionfo che sale dall'abisso (147).

The amplified battle which is the foundation of the socio-historical narrative of Italian coloniser *versus* colonised Abyssinian is therefore also played out in the more intimate space of the relationship between the lieutenant and Mariam. Indeed, both are individual representations of the broader historical conflict, absorbing the contradictions, imbalances, injustices and absurdities of the colonial conquest.

The various changes which characterise the protagonist's attitude towards Mariam are clear indications of the fragility of his existence. In his relentless desire to absolve himself of his "sin" and to silence those ubiquitous echoes of guilt, the lieutenant extends his mechanisms of self-justification to others in a vain attempt to escape psychological incarceration. As he says of the Major in the second chapter, "Se uccidessi quest'uomo' pensai 'seppellirei *anche* la parte peggiore di me stesso"(94). At the same time, however, as an individual he embodies collective guilt, taking onto his shoulders the weight of the violence or emotional depravity of the deeds of others. For example, deeply affected by the image of two Abyssinian men hanging from a tree in the aftermath of an attack, the lieutenant reflects "Ecco, forse dovevo segnare sul mio taccuino, anche la morte di quei due giovani. Confusamente sentivo che la colpa era ancora sempre la mia" (105). Thus, one sees here the transposition of his internal struggle onto the environment which surrounds him, as though he were also a personification of collective colonial guilt.

As Sergiacomo notes, the suspicion of having contracted leprosy from his victim sees Mariam being transformed from an “angelica farfalla” to a “verme immondo” (Sergiacomo, 1994: 44). This transformation of representation is best reflected in the lieutenant's attitude towards the crime itself. Oscillating between repugnance and reverence (for at times he portrays himself as akin to a saviour of sorts), he fights an unflinching battle with his psyche. For example, when faced with the prospect of having to return to the area of Mariam's grave with his fellow soldiers (under the instruction to improve the short cut - the very short cut which led him down the wrong path in the first instance), he says:

La cosa mi ripugnava profondamente, e non è dunque sempre vero che gli assassini sono attratti a tornare sul luogo del loro delitto. Forse questa mia ripugnanza voleva significare che era troppo parlare di delitto? Bene, ecco un lieve motivo di consolazione (103).

This extract once again reveals a nuanced glimpse of the protagonist's reasoning process. In “Bene, ecco un lieve motivo di consolazione” there appears to be a recognition of the futile and delusory basis of his attempt to salve his conscience. The process of reasoning, which recurs throughout the novel, allows him to arrive at a conclusion which is easier to accept. In essence, the lieutenant's often retrospective rationalisations act as a fraudulent means of eliminating his self-doubt which, by its very nature, perpetuates itself in the text. The protagonist needs to convince himself of his “innocence” in a bid, however elusive in nature, to remove his moral and emotional conflicts.

In the following three extracts, one sees the contradictions caused either by the stream of consciousness mode or by the interjection of the second voice (or “narrative” self), both of which are central to the “scarto narrativo/rivelatorio” in the narrative “alternanza”. The contradictions in the narrative are extended to the realm of ideas, incorporating a need to soothe the demands of his conscience, echoing Svevo's Zeno Cosini in *La Coscienza di Zeno*.

1. La mia colpa era quasi svanita. L'avrebbero uccisa egualmente. E uccisa come! Avevo preceduto di pochi giorni il suo feroce destino, evitandole una fine molto più dolorosa. Non aveva visto uccidere i suoi, né incendiare le capanne, né sentito la grida degli uomini che uccidono per uccidere. Questo andavo ripetendomi mentre scendevo il sentiero della collina. E giunsi persino a compiacermi di averla uccisa (114).

2. Non apparteneva più a me, ma alla terra, e a una terra che avrei lasciato per sempre tra un mese o due. Potevo anche convincermi di non aver commesso nulla che esorbitasse dalle leggi di questa natura, forse col tempo riterrei persino di non averla uccisa e già mi riusciva difficile rammentare la scena, o la rivedevo come attraverso un racconto altrui [...] Dopo qualche minuto, il suo respiro era la sola cosa che udivo, come il condannato a morte di tutti i rumori del carcere ode soltanto l'orologio che batte nel taschino del confessore (132).

3. L'aver ucciso Mariam ora mi appariva un delitto indispensabile, ma non per le ragioni che me l'avevano suggerito. Più che un delitto, anzi, mi appariva una crisi, una malattia, che mi avrebbe difeso per sempre, rivelandomi a me stesso. Amavo, ora, la mia vittima e potevo temere soltanto che mi abbandonasse (277).

The first extract is one of many examples dealing with the theme of guilt arising from having killed Mariam. Upon learning of the massacre at what he suspects to have been Mariam's village, the lieutenant's tendency towards self-reproach is replaced by tenuous self-congratulation. He portrays himself as a saviour, having rescued the Abyssinian woman from that which he perceives to have been imminent and inevitable death at the hands of bandits. Hearing of the massacre provides him with a possible escape from the claws of culpability. Much like everything else in the novel, this is later undermined by self-doubt, "Eppoi, dicevo, non l'avrebbero uccisa. Anche lei quel giorno sarebbe andata sull'altopiano con Elias e col vecchio Johannes della tribù" (245). Illustrated by his reflection "[...]L'avrebbero uccisa egualmente [...]Questo andavo ripetendomi mentre scendevo il sentiero della collina. *E giunsi persino a compiacermi di averla uccisa* [own italics]" is the notion that it is only through the repetition of excuses that he is able to convince himself that his guilt "era quasi svanita". Thus, it is not only the reader but also the the protagonist himself who is clearly not convinced of his ostensible conviction.

In spite of his attempt at self-absolution, in the remaining chapters the lieutenant is never truly capable of eradicating the sense of uncertainty which suffuses the text. Although the second extract opens with the attempt to establish a distance between himself and his victim, "Non apparteneva più a me, ma alla terra", this belief is immediately undermined. By his own admission, this distance is a means, however temporary, of trying to reach expiation, "Potevo anche convincermi di non aver commesso nulla che esorbitasse dalle leggi di questa natura, forse col tempo riterrei persino di non averla uccisa". The futility of this mental exercise accentuates his feeling of inadequacy: although he is mindful of the ephemeral nature of illusions, he is incapable of wholeheartedly deserting them. In a Pirandellian sense, the illusions which he constructs for himself are his only source of stability, although this stability is constantly questioned. It is for this reason that it is just a few lines later that we see the re-emergence of the motif of the metaphorical prison. With the sensory evocation of Mariam's breathing he is catapulted back into his situation, "come il condannato a morte di tutti i rumori del carcere ode soltanto l'orologio che batte nel taschino del confessore." Ingrained in this simile is a palpable echo of Borgese's protagonist, Rubè, who after a bomb attack, finds himself in his room, deep in self-reflection, "con l'animo di un prigioniero condannato a morte" (Borgese, 1974: 43). This pattern of entrapment is reinforced throughout the course of *Tempo di uccidere*, as a neurotic cycle from which the lieutenant is quite unable to liberate himself. He is locked in his

reality, and although aware of a moral universe and an ethical dimension to existence, he is unable to find a short cut to exculpation. Indeed, it is only through accepting the instability at the core of his existence and embracing the symbolic significance of Mariam that he is given, to some extent, some respite from his demons.

The effect of this acceptance of, or resignation to, the uncertain nature of his existence is apparent in the third extract which appears at the end of the novel. The progression which emerges as a result of Mariam's death in the opening chapter now finds its ultimate expression (although this is not without its characteristic contradictions). Recognising the allegorical significance of his “delitto indispensabile” as a means of reaching self-revelation, here Mariam's symbolic role in the protagonist's ontological journey is made explicit. In essence, her death is attributed to the arbitrary nature of chance. Chance is a leitmotiv which is equally prominent in Pirandello's *Il Fu Mattia Pascal*, and is here re-evoked to underscore the crisis of the “inetto”. Mariam is depicted as a cardinal instrument of his self-reflection and exploration, but the existential significance of his crime - Flaiano's “literary nostalgia” - is elucidated by: “Più che un delitto, anzi, mi appariva una crisi, una malattia, che mi avrebbe difeso per sempre.” The narrative “alternanza” in the depiction of Mariam thus comes to a close, and the cycle of representation is completed. Transformed from an exotic object of his desire into a vindictive traitor, at the close of the novel she is arguably the only certainty which remains in the lieutenant's internal world: “una compagna che equivale a un ergastolo” (Pautasso, 1994: 22).

The anticlimactic resolution to the theme of his guilty conscience sees that the lieutenant “si sente il peso dell'incombenza kafkiana, ma più come alone, perché l'impotenza del tenente di Flaiano di fronte all'assurda ossessione della colpa che lo condanna alla fuga, all'estraneità, all'autodistruzione è poi annullata da una fredda deduzione burocratica: “Non c'erano denunce” (Pautasso, 1994: 18).

As Sergiacomo argues:

L'ambiguità totale e finale delle valutazioni su Mariam e sulla sua morte [...] si regge interamante sul motivo dell'alternanza di giudizio, propria nella fisionomia dell'inetto che non sa catalogare con certezza né il reale né se stesso e cerca l'assoluzione dalla sua colpa, ma l'alternanza del sentire e capire è anche cooccorrente all'altro tema centrale del romanzo, legato all'inettitudine, quello dell'inconoscibilità del reale e della inadeguatezza dei nostri desideri e della nostra volontà sul fatale e misterioso corso della vita (Sergiacomo, 1994: 44).

Evidently, it is a conclusion which resonates deeply with the renowned “inetti” of the early twentieth century, that of “il dubbio come unica possibilità conoscibile” (Di Giacomo, 1968: 117). On the other side of the spectrum, however, we could argue that the depiction of “Lei”, the protagonist's wife in Italy, is subject to a reverse transformation. In the earlier chapters of the novel

she is portrayed as the only source of notional stability in the hostile theatre of war. However, as the plot develops she too undergoes a metamorphosis which, to a greater or lesser extent, resembles the process we have already seen in the depiction of Mariam. Initially, his wife acts as a moral foundation from which the protagonist negotiates the avenues of his conscience. Her letters are a nuanced reminder of a reality that is juxtaposed to the context of the threatening African terrain, and thus she is the link between the protagonist's past and his future. This psychological mechanism allows him to consider his present reality as existing *outside* of time, echoed by the leitmotiv of the watch. Indeed, the fact that his watch stops for the duration of the erotic-exotic encounter with Mariam is significant as not only does it render the moment “eternal”, but one could argue that it simultaneously negates its very existence. Disconnected from the relentless continuum that is time, the events which occur during the protagonist's interaction with Mariam are effectively non-existent, suspended above a time-bound context.

The incongruous “absent presence” of his wife is a source of comfort, and through remembering her, the lieutenant is able to conceive of a possible future, free from the personal inadequacies and horrors which plague him in the colonial context (Sergiacomo, 1994: 47). Indeed, it appears as though the driving force behind his perseverance is essentially the prospect of reading another one of her letters, “una lunga lettera, fitta di una scrittura eguale, tonda ma esile, e i fogli pieni tutt'intorno al margine, senza uno spazio bianco: proprio una lettera da rileggere” (28) and eventually seeing her, “Dovevo star calmo e tornare da Lei, tentare di tornare” (147). Her letters form a constant thread which binds the various elements of the chronological (and also ontological) plot. However, although his wife performs a stabilising role in the protagonist's life, she is also a source of his feelings of inadequacy. This is evident, for example, through his aspirations to please her, relying on her approval to validate his existence, “[...]il giorno che non avessi avuto più speranze (l'avrei letto negli occhi di Lei), mi sarei ucciso” (147). One of the most pertinent examples of narrative “alternanza” and the theme of ineptitude (in the context of the protagonist's relationship with his absent wife) occurs soon after he becomes convinced of having contracted leprosy and considers suicide. In this extract, one sees the customary confluence of contradictory elements with the narrative schism between intention and action, once again highlighting the lieutenant's weakness:

Ma il riso trasmutava in singhiozzo e pensai che dovevo scrivere a Lei, almeno scriverle. Ogni volta strappavo il foglio, le parole non venivano. Ecco, non dovevo dirle nulla, così non avrebbe provato nemmeno un senso postumo di schifo per la mia persona. Doveva essere un incidente: doveva succedere mentre pulivo la rivoltella [...] Tutto era a posto. Ma, non c'erano molte cose da fare? Scriverle almeno l'ultima volta, una lettera come tutte le altre? Le avrei parlato del prossimo ritorno, o dello spostamento che si riteneva imminente, le avrei parlato dei pacchi ricevuti, chiesto altri libri. Questo potevo farlo (146).

Apparent in this passage is the appeal to a past existence, with emphasis falling on the banal sureties of military life in Abyssinia pre-Mariam, during which the content of letters was restricted to the routines of a soldier, illustrated by the line “Le avrei parlato del prossimo ritorno [...]avrei parlato dei pacchi ricevuti, chiesto altri libri”. In essence, it is a somewhat nostalgic appeal to a life which was free from the doubt and guilt which has grown incrementally since the death of Mariam. It is a life which perhaps never really existed, for it could be argued that to live unconsciously, metaphorically speaking, is not to live at all.

In addition to the appeal to a “normal” past, once again one sees the lieutenant scrambling for a pretext, an excuse to postpone his suicide attempt, “Ma, non c'erano molte cose da fare?”, concluding that the very least he can do is write his wife a letter. In his own words: “Questo potevo farlo.” The passage continues:

Scrisi la lettera [...] Quando l'ebbi scritta e riletta e l'ebbi messa nella busta, pensai che era una lettera toccata dalle mie mani. No, non potevo mandarla. E le altre, tutte le altre? Non era una buona ragione perché seguitassi a mandarne. Bruciai la lettera e ripresi la rivoltella, ma stavo giocando con me stesso, *sentivo che non avrei avuto la forza* [own italics] di premere il grilletto. E allora, al limite della disperazione, venne ciò che temevo: la speranza (146).

Both intentions which are conveyed in the opening lines of this extract - writing to his wife and committing suicide - are accordingly left unfulfilled. This is, of course, hardly surprising. Aware of his weakness, “sentivo che non avrei avuto la forza di premere il grilletto”, the protagonist is equally incapable of sending the letter. Suspended between intention and action, he finds hope. Indeed, perhaps it is subliminal presence of hope (and its adversary, disappointment) which drives the theme of ineptitude in the novel. Aware of the realm of possibility, be it a future in Italy with his wife or a clear short cut through the Abyssinian landscape, he clings onto hope: a representation of the potential for self-fulfillment. That presumed potential, however, is never realised. Thus, the chasm between intention and action mirrors the chasm between hope or possibility and disappointment, adding another dimension to the lieutenant’s neurosis. Ultimately, Flaiano’s protagonist is condemned to living an existence which is, at its very core, devoid of illusions. Herein lies another irony, given that he has been so ready to delude himself throughout the course of the plot. When seen in its historical context, one could amplify this vision onto a broader scale to incorporate the illusions shattered by the horrors of the Second World War. At the close of the novel, the lieutenant sheds his illusions and confronts his existence without them. So too does Flaiano, who sheds the illusions of idealism in post-war Italian society. This could be further extended to include the illusions of neorealism, which in its attempt to convey “reality” through the necessary fiction of a novel or feature film exposes, in the words of the rather sceptical Flaiano,

“La ridicola corsa dell'artista dietro la realtà, che a sua volta insegue la moda, che insegue solo se stessa” (Quarantotto, 1994: 69).

The lieutenant's dependence on his wife fuels her final metamorphosis from a quasi-mythological force of reason to an accomplice to his crime. In this way, he is able to transpose his guilt onto her. In so doing, he attempts to absolve himself of direct responsibility for his criminal acts. In the closing chapter, he concludes:

Comincio a credere che dovrò abbandonare anche il mio ultimo complice. Per quel suo volto dei momenti gravi, ho ucciso la donna. Il dottore del cantiere non sarebbe venuto, ma io l'ho uccisa egualmente. Dovrò lasciarla. Credevo che la sua malinconia le venisse dall'esperienza del cuore e fosse meditatissima e sentita. Ora dovrò convincermi che in lei è soltanto una traspirazione organica, un alito freddo e fetido. Forse lo stesso fiato che mi angustiava un tempo, rammentandomi ciò che più temevo. Se lei dovesse entrare in acqua senza spogliarsi, facendomi cenno di seguirla, starei fermo sulla riva, incapace di accettare le leggi della sua ipocrita pazzia (274).

The mutations in the representations of both Mariam and his wife are reflections of the vacillations which emerge as a result of the protagonist's self-doubt, instability and sense of inadequacy. In relinquishing one omnipresent figure, his wife, he then turns to the other, Mariam, who through the course of the novel has become a source of stability. In embracing the memory of Mariam, “amavo la mia vittima e potevo temere soltanto che mi abbandonasse” (277), he comes to accept his *impuissance* in the face of the uncontrollable forces of chance. She becomes an inexorable reminder of who he really is: merely a personification of the uncertain and unknowable world which surrounds him, thus an echo of Schopenhauer's idea of “The world as will and representation.” This resignation to his fate, like the resignation of Pirandello's Mattia Pascal or Svevo's Zeno, resonates in the words of the German philosopher :

Why should he now, with such knowledge of the world, assert this very life through constant acts of will, and thereby bind himself ever more to the pleasures in which it recognises the assertion of life. Man now attains to the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation, true indifference, and perfect willlessness (Schopenhauer, 1977: 490).

Thus, although it is his wife who dominates the opening part of the novel, for she is proof not only of a normal past but also of a possible future, it is Mariam, from beyond the grave, who guides the protagonist's interrogation and understanding of life. We see the lieutenant's fascination with that dark, mysterious and timeless world lying behind her two thousand year old eyes, that world inured with the possibility of it being immensely more happy than his own (Sergiacomo, 1994: 48). Not only does she fuel his sense of guilt and his fear of disease, but she also represents more than just an object of pure desire - she is a catalyst for his awareness of self. She embodies a return to an “authentic” existence and an adherence to an “authentic” self, free from the artifice of modernity and far removed from the insulated cocoon of bourgeois, Italian middle-class society. In essence,

she is vehicle with which the protagonist is able to establish an emotional attachment to this world. His wife, on the other hand, represents the antithesis of this: an “inauthentic”, conformist existence, adhering to the alienating norms of modern, Western civilisation. However challenging, the Abyssinian experience is the stimulus for this realisation, acting as a foundation from which the lieutenant is able to explore the authenticity of being. And, instead of rejecting life, he actively engages with it.

In tracing the progression of narrative “alternanza” in the depictions of the two central female figures in *Tempo di uccidere*, one is struck by the extent to which they are placed in opposition to one another, as polarised spheres of influence. Furthermore, this polarity is never truly reconciled (neither can it be) and the novel closes with a clear inversion of their respective influences. The circular nature of the narrative is a key element of this contraposition, as the lack of a definitive conclusion is a direct consequence of the “vagabondaggio”: the self-perpetuating cycle of experience. Whether in characterisation, narrative technique or the continual return to the same geographical spaces (most pertinently, Mariam's grave), Flaiano succeeds in infusing the text with an ambiguity which transcends the socio-historical context of 1935 Abyssinia. As Pautasso concludes:

Il raccordo simbolico tra parola e immagine mi pare evidente. Ma altrettanto evidente mi pare il peso che esso ha nella soluzione narrativa di *Tempo di uccidere*. Il romanzo di Flaiano sembra chiudersi con un nulla di fatto. Nel gioco dei contrasti la ragione ha provato con l'assenza di prove l'evidenza che il fatto non sussiste[...] Ma l'assenza di prove [...] non può annullare ciò che essa ha comunque fatto depositare nella coscienza (Pautasso, 1994: 22) .

Perhaps the most appropriate conclusion for this section of narrative “alternanza” is captured by the characteristically cynical second lieutenant, in the closing chapter entitled *Punti oscuri*:

“Come tutte le storie di questo mondo, anche la tua sfugge a un'indagine. A meno che non si voglia ammettere che le ‘disgraziate circostanze’ ti seguivano, perché facevano parte della tua persona. Obbedivano soltanto a te. Eri tu, insomma. Ma dove rifarsi? Come cavarne una morale? Eccoti diventato una persona saggia, da quel giovane superficiale che eri, e solo per virtù di qualche assassinio commesso senza annettergli la minima importanza. Mi congratulo” (277).

Here the second lieutenant, who throughout the course of the novel plays a role of the wise yet cynical compatriot, captures the essence of the plot. The absence of any apparent moral framework to be drawn from the lieutenant's experience is commensurate with the hazy, doubt-ridden nature of his journey. The novel's open-ended and essentially anticlimactic conclusion, which sees him escaping any official censure for his actions, reinforces the philosophical and psychological implications of his character development. As the second lieutenant says, the meaning of the protagonist's experience lies not in determining the line between right or wrong or real or imagined.

Rather, in the eyes of the second lieutenant, it lies in the personal progression of the anti-hero, from a superficial youth to a wise individual. In Chapter Three, it was argued that the progression in the novel, as far as the principal character is concerned, is limited or non-existent³⁰. By this, it is intended that the development cannot be understood along conventional lines. The harsh African landscape does not provide a blank canvas for the protagonist's personal growth, such that at the close of the novel we are not confronted with a character who has experienced the regenerative effects both of his crimes and of his disease. Rather, his “wisdom” lies in his unwillingness to conform to the norms of a “diseased” society, and in his realisation of the mendacious foundations upon which the illusions of a fathomable existence and a knowable, defined reality are based. The protagonist’s experience in Abyssinia sees him coming to terms with his “natural self” in a bid to find solace in a world that he finds inherently meaningless, while participating in a military invasion he struggles to understand. *Tempo di uccidere* thus encapsulates the dilemma of imposing inauthenticity (a product of modernity) onto another entity, exploring the effects not only – in this case - on the subjugated society at large, but also on the individual.

Arguably, the most appropriate interpretation of the novel's conclusion appears in an early review of *Tempo di uccidere*. Published in 1953, Albert J. Guerard concludes that the universal ambiguity in the novel underlines the themes of indifference, regression, failure and inertia, while raising the question of individual responsibility in an increasingly absurd and hostile world. He writes that “il protagonista, insomma, precisatosi nella sua carica simbolica, è l'individuo che trasforma la sua 'colpa individuale' in colpa d'una condizione esistenziale, vista senza scopo e senza possibilità di utili alternative” (as cited in Moretti, 1994: 110). Indeed, in light of the events of the plot, as readers we are not provided with a coherent or fulfilling vision for the future, a set of moral alternatives or existential clarity. The apparent “nulla di fatto” is arguably infused with a sense of Flaiano’s ironic vision and so, the most appropriate way to conclude this section lies in the words of the lieutenant himself, “I dubbi confortano, meglio tenerseli” (284).

³⁰ See pg. 45

Chapter Five

“Mi piaceva di vederlo felice nella sua illusione di essere tanto forte quando era debolissimo” (Svevo, 2010: 43).

**Figures of strength, figures of weakness:
Perceptions of difference in the protagonist of
*Tempo di uccidere***

5.1 Introduction

Ero un intruso, tra quei cadaveri. Io ero, semmai, un cadavere diverso, anelavo ancora la vita. Perciò il villaggio era contro di me, come del resto tutta la valle. Anche quei versetti che leggevo erano contro di me, mi accusavano con l'insistenza e la crudeltà delle parole semplici che improvvisamente riacquistano il loro significato. Ero un assassino, un ladro, un malato, un uomo colpito dalla collera divina. E ancora inseguivo le vanità. Ero anche un fuggiasco, e per Johannes, un nemico [...] che la mia presenza offendeva lui, gli alerbi, le capanne, i morti (250).

It is, as we have seen, through the often contradictory or ambiguous narrative that the reader is repeatedly alerted to the discontinuity between intention and action, and hence to the lieutenant's overwhelming sense of inadequacy. These elements of the narrative are instrumental in the depiction of the “inetto”. However, the ontological thread which frames the novel is not restricted solely to the definition of “alternanza”. In assessing the protagonist's perception of the other characters in the novel, it becomes increasingly clear that he sees himself in opposition to them, as an “inetto” afflicted by his “deplorable debolezza” (126) and condemned to the realm of imitation. The relationships between the principal character and his co-protagonists continually undergo radical changes, with animosity often being recast into affinity within a matter of a few sentences, and vice versa. To the critical eye, this quite clearly recalls the mechanism at the core of “alternanza”. In a further reinforcement of the idea that Flaiano's technique is an embodiment of the lieutenant's inherently capricious nature, we see that he intentionally disturbs our view of his protagonist with the fragmented and frequently discordant narrative.

The notion of a weak/strong opposition is common to many of the literary “inetti” of the early 20th century, whether evoked by the likes of Tozzi, Borgese, Svevo or Pirandello. In Svevo's *La Coscienza di Zeno*, for example, there is a conspicuous opposition of the inept protagonist with the people who surround him. This is evident through frequent references to his weakness when confronted with figures such as Guido, “tutte le debolezze trovavano facilmente il mio compatimento, non la sua” (Svevo, 2010: 121) and his father, “e se ne andava convinto della mia insanabile debolezza” (Svevo, 2010: 47). The foundation for this weakness is rooted in both an objective and a subjective reality. Not only does Zeno perceive himself to be different, but his behaviour towards others confirms this difference. This “ill-suitedness” to life, however, is better understood as an inability or a refusal to conform to the conventional structures of the society in which he finds himself. Flaiano's lieutenant's perception of difference can be interpreted along the same lines. On one hand, much like Zeno, his effete nature comes to light largely through his interactions with other characters in a form of a weak/strong opposition. On the other hand, it also

materialises through his self-perception of his strength, or lack thereof. In the same way that the strength of the secondary characters in the novel serves to highlight the lieutenant's weakness, so his insecurities serve to highlight the presumed competence of others. Given that this is guided by his unstable state of mind, it can be considered subjective. However, it is equally true that from an objective point of view the protagonist is in fact weak, highlighted most clearly by his inability to convert intention into action.

The lieutenant's *difference*, his being ill-suited to life, is consistently emphasised in his interactions with the Major, the smuggler, Mariam, Johannes, or even the young and entrepreneurial Elias. Indeed, in addition to that which Sergiacomo defines as the “confronto inetto-forte”, the protagonist's self-perception of inadequacy filters through the text in various guises. Although at times he tries to assert his supposed strength, his efforts are in vain. Ultimately, both the reader and the lieutenant are left unconvinced and these sporadic displays of psychological vigour are much like those displayed by Zeno Cosini in *La Coscienza di Zeno*: namely, conscious illusions. In other words, he willfully deludes himself, and for the duration of the novel this pattern of behaviour manifests itself in feelings of alienation and melancholy. Although the lieutenant is “inadatto alla vita” (192), his lucid understanding and acceptance of the transient nature of reality, and thus of existence, ultimately places him in the paradoxical position of existential enlightenment. In this way, he is a direct descendant of the “inetti” of the *Primo Novecento*. In *Tempo di uccidere* this sense of enlightenment - the realisation of a collective incapacity to know ourselves - is not as obvious or perhaps as complex as it is in *La Coscienza di Zeno*. That notwithstanding, both inept protagonists are portrayed as marginalised figures, whose alienation is a necessary consequence of their respective refusal to conform to the pretences of an illusory, mendacious existence imposed upon them by society: their rejection, in essence, of the Suvian “occhialuto uomo” (Svevo, 2010: 365)³¹.

Given that the typical “inetto” exists at the fringe of society, it is not surprising that one sees in the lieutenant a tentative admiration for the characters he encounters, often combined with deep-seated resentment. This is to be expected, for they are constant reminders of a strength which will forever prove out of his reach. It is for this reason that the power balance between the lieutenant and

³¹ “Ma gli occhialuto uomo, invece, inventa gli ordigni fuori del suo corpo e se c'è stata salute e nobiltà in chi li inventò, quasi sempre manda in chi li usa. Gli ordigni si comperano, si vendono e si rubano e l'uomo diventa sempre più furbo e più debole” (Svevo, 2010: 364). The image of the “occhialuto uomo” appears in the closing paragraphs of *La Coscienza di Zeno*, and in effect embodies, as Cristina Benussi argues, “un'immagine dell'umanità come specie degenerate, che inventando dispositivi culturali per compensare l'indebolimento degli istinti ha bisogno di protesi artificiali per surrogare gli strumenti biologici di autoprotezione (valori morali e ideologici, scientifici e ed economici ecc.)” (Svevo, 2010: 386).

Mariam, as well as between him and his wife, occupies such a central role in illustrating the theme of ineptitude in the text. Relying on his wife to provide him with the moral and emotional strength which he is incapable of finding within himself, he effectively places himself at a distance from the decisions he makes. It is, in essence, a means with which he is able to divest himself of responsibility. Although the memory of his wife is comforting, she is also a reminder of his own powerlessness and a source of shame, “cercavo di vivere col ricordo di Lei, di rintracciare, nei più dimenticabili ricordi, i momenti della nostra felicità. *E me ne vergognavo* [own italics]”(85). The protagonist realises that his dedication to her memory and his desire to pursue a future with her have led him down the path of criminality. This is the catalyst for the transformation in the way in which she is depicted. In essence, his wife shifts from being the protective source of his determination to an unfaithful object of blame. This realisation is, in effect, merely a disguised means of transposing culpability onto a figure other than himself, which is only to be expected of the perpetual “inetto” (Sergiacomo, 1995: 46). As Sergiacomo argues, in keeping with the pattern of “alternanza”, the lieutenant's solution is unsurprisingly paradoxical: the opposition of the weak lieutenant against the reassuring presence of his wife is resolved by his decision to leave her, perceiving her as the root of his *male*, as the reason for his deviation from the Dantesque “diritta via”(Sergiacomo, 1995: 47). In this way, he is able (albeit superficially so) to renegotiate his position of weakness in the face of his wife's perceived strength.

The lieutenant defines himself in relation to others (most significantly to Mariam and his wife), and therefore it is not surprising that the strong characters are defined in relation to his own weakness. In other words, emphasis is placed on the characteristics which separate the protagonist from those who are considered stronger or more able than he is (Sergiacomo, 1994: 45). This distinction is rendered more explicit by certain signals in the text. Stress is placed on the physical appearance of characters while the protagonist reveals little to nothing about his own attributes; they are presented only in the form of dialogue and are deprived of a monologue; and finally, the characters never appear alone, and so their respective portrayals are framed solely by the protagonist's perspective (Sergiacomo, 1994: 45). Indeed, they are moulded by his prejudices, weaknesses and insecurities. In addition, the strong characters have a defined sphere of influence, whereas the protagonist wanders around the same places, pulled by forces which are beyond his control: Mariam has her grave, his wife has Italy, Johannes has his village, the doctor has his verandah, the Major has the barracks and the second lieutenant has the piazza di A. (Sergiacomo, 1994: 45). In effect, the other characters' sense of belonging accentuates the lieutenant's sense of *non*-belonging. Their defined spheres of influence reflect their fixed identities, a far cry from the confusion and rootlessness of the “inetto”. While these are textual indications which are applicable to all of the characters who show strength

in the face of the protagonist's weakness, there are specific examples which warrant further attention, namely the opposition of the lieutenant with the doctor, Major, and Johannes.

5.2 Exposing the “inetto”: the revelatory function of the doctor, Major and Johannes

Il mio suicidio è riuscito perfettamente (163).

M'ero dimostrato più forte di lui, infatti, ma presto dovetti sentirmi di lui più debole (Svevo, 2010: 124).

It is worth noting that not all the strong characters in the novel are presented in a uniform manner, that is to say as equally perfidious and morally deficient as the Major (Sergiacomo, 1994: 46). Similarly, it is evident that the protagonist's reaction to these diametrically opposed characters varies, ranging from aggression and envy to esteem and respect. However, common to all weak/strong oppositions is the fact that the lieutenant recognises his incapacity ever to acquire the strength displayed by his co-protagonists, and he is consequently restricted to the realm of imitation. However, as the plot develops, it becomes increasingly obvious that his capacity for imitation is about as limited as his potential for acquiring strength. Plagued with a desire to emulate or even to surpass the strength of others, the lieutenant finds himself descending into a spiral of failures. In line with the broader narrative of the novel, he is caught in a vicious cycle: the more he tries to free himself from this metaphysical entrapment, the more he becomes enslaved to the awareness of his inadequacy.

Often bordering on the ridiculous and absurd, the attempted murder of both the doctor and the Major are obvious examples of the problematic nature of this weak/strong opposition. The frequently farcical elements which come to light through these episodes serve to highlight his accelerating psychological deterioration, as the weight of both his guilt and his perceived disease continues to bedevil his judgement. Additionally, as is characteristic of Flaiano's narrative style, the exchanges with his stronger counterparts are steeped in contradiction. As a consequence, the boundaries which define the nature of the interactions between the weak lieutenant and his strong fellow characters are not fixed. This not only exacerbates his lack of orientation and certainty, but it also demonstrates how tenuous his grip is on a consistent ethical paradigm. In terms of the ontological narrative in *Tempo di uccidere*, the exchanges between the lieutenant and the other characters thus act as catalysts of revelation, exposing the defining weaknesses of the “inetto” not only to the reader, but also to himself.

In one of the central episodes of the novel the lieutenant, overcome by the conviction of having contracted leprosy from Mariam, seeks out the advice of an Italian doctor. Fearing the doctor will uncover his secret and report him, he goes to various lengths to ensure that his interest in leprosy is

perceived as purely literary, as opposed to being rooted in actual concerns over his own health. In this encounter we see the re-emergence of the motif of the need to find a pretext. The pretext, like those which have preceded it, functions more as a means of calming the protagonist's nerves than it does as a means of convincing the doctor of the authenticity of his intentions. Here we see a discernible parallel with the figure of Zeno Cosini, who as Nunzio Di Giacomo writes “[...] è impegnato con la sua coscienza; per ingannarla, egli deve ricorrere di frequente a pretesti che sono sempre menzogne rivestite nei panni della verità” (Di Giacomo, 1968: 99). From the initial pretext emerges a metanarrative imbued with echoes of both the Italian lieutenant's experience as well as that of Flaiano himself. He explains to the doctor that he is writing a novel about an Italian engineer who finds himself in Abyssinia and, after a sexual encounter with an indigenous woman, falls ill with a tropical disease. Recalling the opening paragraphs of *Aethiopia: Appunti per una canzonetta*, the lieutenant says of his principal character “Gli avevano descritto il paese come una fonte di ricchezze e lui vi trova soltanto la morte” (155). The plot which the lieutenant describes conspicuously mirrors his experience with Mariam and his subsequent disease. Moreover, the doctor's advice to him, that “Un buon scrittore non precisa mai” (159), is seen by Sergiacomo as narrative self-reference on the part of Flaiano (Sergiacomo, 1994: 47). In other words, the style of the fictional author at the centre of the protagonist's elaborate pretext reflects the style of the real author behind the story of the anonymous lieutenant in Abyssinia.

There are a number of devices employed during this encounter which not only contribute to establishing narrative tension, but which also underline the friction which dominates the protagonist's psyche. At the heart of this friction lies the extensive use of physical description, dialogue, short sentences and rhetorical questions. These narrative and linguistic devices prove instrumental in establishing an atmosphere characterised by both animosity and benevolence. In fact, one is able to trace the transformations in this atmosphere by specific textual signals. An example of this would be the language used to describe the doctor, which oscillates between conveying disdain and fraternal admiration. A similar mechanism is applied to the descriptions of both the Major and Johannes, as well as throughout the lieutenant's problematic relationship with Elias, the young entrepreneurial success, whom he accepts as a “castigo, il più lieve che mi fosse da scegliere, ma come un castigo” (116). In all four cases, the lieutenant is forced to resort to superficial criticism in an attempt to assert transcendent superiority over his adversaries. However, this seemingly futile exercise originates from a sense of his increasing desperation and helplessness: in effect, in his incapacity to transcend the limitations of his own incompetence.

The encounter with the doctor opens with a physical description filtered through the somewhat contemptuous gaze of the narrator-protagonist:

Era uno di quei pigri che amano la solitudine e sanno difenderla. S'era messo lì, lontano da tutti, perché l'Africa gli aveva sviluppato un solo timore: quello di essere disturbato. Sfidava ogni pericolo pur di alimentare la sua dolcissima noia, leggeva giornali vecchi di un mese, forse non aspettava nemmeno il giorno del ritorno, tutto doveva essergli indifferente (153).

The protagonist emphasises the doctor's torpid disposition in such a way that it seems as if he were the physical embodiment of the langour of the African landscape. In stark opposition to the regimented order of the army, the doctor's room is described as disordered, filled with “cianfrusaglie che lo occupavano” (153). This effectively undermines his role, suggesting he is a negative by-product of the would-be great imperial endeavour. Nonetheless, it is the doctor who, along with the second lieutenant and the smuggler, arguably displays the most astute understanding of the colonial project, illustrated for example by the aphorism, “Si diventa lebbrosi come si diventa tiranni: ereditarietà o contagio” (156). Nevertheless, this portrayal recalls that of a grotesque caricature, with the protagonist accentuating his animal and child-like characteristics, such as “quel corpo mastodontico la piccola testa sembrava essere illuminata” (154) and “ora stava per immergersi nella lettura del suo giornale, come l'ippopotamo si rituffa nel suo brodo” (154). The physical depiction of the doctor emerges as the central feature of their encounter, for ultimately it is the sole means available to the protagonist for the assertion, however misguided, of his superiority.

At both the beginning and at the end of their meeting the lieutenant's supercilious references to the doctor's laziness echo his insecurity as he grapples with a need to assert his supposed strength. In initially describing the doctor in condescending terms, he is able to establish a temporary position of superiority. This position of illusory power can be interpreted, albeit somewhat ironically, as originating from a feeling of self-styled moral supremacy. Although he is overcome with guilt and fear in the aftermath of Mariam's death, at this stage of novel there is still a sense that he is seeking absolution. He has not yet resigned himself to the inevitability of his destiny, and he has not yet ventured beyond what he considers to be an acceptable realm of forgiveness. The doctor, on the other hand, is portrayed as lazy and indifferent, contaminated by the inertia which is so central to the protagonist's vision of Africa. Thus, in the lieutenant's mind, the doctor is beyond reprieve. Within this very idea lies a further irony. While the inept, doubt-ridden protagonist strives to establish a position of power in relation to the doctor, he is also aware of the fact that his fate lies in the hands of his languorous compatriot. We see here the re-emergence of the theme of fate, which far from being dictated by the army, Mariam or his wife, is perceived to be controlled by the doctor. He has in part surrendered power to the doctor and ascribed the value of destiny to his adversary. The doctor, therefore, in spite of his lazy disposition, his indifference to life and his slovenly

surroundings, has the power to control his fate. It is a strength, as we are by now well aware, which will forever remain beyond the reach of the perpetually weak “inetto”.

As the lieutenant's anxiety intensifies, fearing that his secret will be uncovered, so we see a change in both language and tone in the text. Increasingly trapped in a neurotic dialogue with himself camouflaged as reason, he searches for indications that reveal the doctor's thoughts. Narrative tension is created by the use of both rhetorical questions and sporadic short sentences. This is illustrated by the following passage, after which there is a shift in the way in which the doctor is imagined. No longer a target of the lieutenant's scorn, he is subsequently, and temporarily, refashioned into an object of affection:

La gola mi si strinse. Voleva denunciarmi. O forse no. Ma se si decideva a muoversi, lui, era segno che voleva denunciarmi. Poiché indugiava a cercare qualcosa sul tavolo, fui preso dall'impulso di fuggire ma le gambe non mi obbedivano. Dovevo fuggire: non mi avrebbe sparato; non era tipo che mirasse giusto. La testa mi girava e non ero capace di muovere un passo [...] Quando ricomparve ci avviammo e, lungo il sentiero, ripresi a parlare. Gli piaceva il mio tema, mi consigliava però di non farne un caso clinico. E non potevo non ammirare la sua padronanza (159).

Here, once again, one sees the motif of “dovevo andarmene” transformed into the more urgent “dovevo fuggire”. The lieutenant, however, is incapable of fleeing. His legs fail to oblige him and he is trapped by his own weakness. However, instead of harbouring anger and antagonism towards the figure of the stronger, wiser doctor, the lieutenant shows admiration, “e non potevo non ammirare la sua padronanza” (160) and “Lo ammiravo. La sua corpulenza, coronata da una testa infantile e biondicia, mi faceva persino credere che tutto si sarebbe risolto in uno scherzo” (160). The lieutenant's contemptuous tone forms part of the mechanism he uses in order to feel superior. His faux admiration, which is also evident in his more fraught relationship with the Major and Johannes, becomes more pronounced during the course of their interaction. As a consequence, an unexpected fraternal tenderness or intimacy is established. The protagonist reflects, “sentii di amarlo fraternamente” (160), again revealing a Modernist need to belong - betraying his “rootlessness”, as it were.

In spite of the ambiguous fraternal intimacy established between the doctor and the protagonist, we are only exposed to their relationship through the eyes of the first-person narrator. In other words, while we are sensitive to the fluctuations in the lieutenant's state of mind, we remain largely unaware of the doctor's thoughts and opinions. Instead, the image presented to the reader is framed by the lieutenant's imposition of his fears onto his enigmatic friend (and adversary). It could be argued that the lieutenant's interpretation of the doctor's supposedly threatening behaviour acts as an early self-justification of (or pretext for) his subsequent crime: the attempted murder of the doctor.

The below passage, perhaps the culmination of their power struggle, sees the conflation of the myriad contradictory emotions present in their encounter. A turning point in the weak/strong opposition, the narrative tone becomes distinctly fraught, with the protagonist returning to his assertion of his strength, however transitory, over his compatriot:

Non ero malato e nessuno aveva il diritto di accertarsi se ero malato. Il dottore ripeté l'invito, a voce più bassa, voleva apparire indifferente. Cercava di mettere allegria nei suoi modi e quella mal recitata commedia adesso mi indignava. Perché non mi metteva di fronte al fatto compiuto? Ecco, la sua insolente pigrizia stava cedendo, e ora si comportava come un fratello, ma purtroppo come un fratello minore. *Sapermi più forte di lui mi stava togliendo ogni coraggio* [own italics](161) .

In effect, in yet another paradox, it is the lieutenant himself who has bestowed upon the doctor the right to confirm whether or not he is suffering from leprosy. The indignant tone, evident for example in “non ero malato e nessuno aveva il diritto di accertarsi se ero malato”, ironically contributes to the sense that his tenuous grip on a position of strength is rapidly slipping away. His self-proclaimed strength, evident in “sarò il più forte” (161), is unsurprisingly not converted into triumph, per se (a fact that is reinforced by the contradictory exclamation “Sapermi più forte di lui mi stava togliendo ogni coraggio”). Once more there is a reminder of another weak/strong opposition, namely that of Svevo's Zeno and Guido. Indeed, perhaps it is Zeno's words which are most befitting in capturing the spirit of the lieutenant at the close of this episode, “m'ero dimostrato più forte di lui, infatti, ma presto dovetti sentirmi di lui più debole” (Svevo, 2010: 123). It is a realisation which can be equally applied to the majority of the interactions between the lieutenant and his fellow characters. Through his attempts to show great strength, it is ultimately only his profound weakness which reveals itself.

The lieutenant's attempted murder of the doctor is borne from more than simply a desire to escape denunciation. One could argue that he is in fact trying to quell his *malattia*³², to deny its very existence - an argument which is supported by his earlier assertion that “non ero malato, e nessuno aveva il diritto di accertarsi se ero malato”. In killing the doctor, he would dispense with the only witness to his “disease” and his self-denial (however ephemeral it may be) could find ultimate expression. However, the unyielding limitations of his ability again prevent him from fully realising his intention and, through a sequence of events, the attempted homicide descends into farce:

Lo vidi sobbalzare, s'era mosso un attimo prima. S'era mosso, lui che stava intere giornate nella sua sedia a sdraio senza batter ciglio! Pronto, premetti ancora il grilletto, ma la rivoltella adesso non sparava. Premetti ancora, non sparava. Il dottore era in piedi, correva verso la baracca, con quell'agilità che soltanto i pigri posseggono[...] Soltanto allora rammentai che la rivoltella non aveva sparato. Con le mani che tremavano, la esaminai. Mancava il caricatore. E come? Non ricordavo. Di colpo scoppiai a ridere, ma era un riso

³² “Malattia” is used here to imply both the physical disease and the metaphysical malaise.

secco, rapido [...] L'avevo lasciato sulla cassetta, il caricatore, accanto alla fotografia di Lei e alla bottiglia del petrololio, nel mio ridicolo tentativo di suicidio [...] *Il mio suicidio è riuscito perfettamente* [own italics]"(162-163).

Again, it is by his own doing that he finds himself in a position of vulnerability and thus from one failure, his “ridicolo tentativo di suicidio”, stems another. As a consequence, he is forced to relinquish his illusory position of strength over his counterpart. Although the doctor has very little direct agency at the conclusion of the episode, his function is to expose the protagonist's state of mind. Immersed in an interminable cycle of disappointments which do nothing more than simply reveal his weakness in the face of others, the lieutenant is therefore condemned to a form of paralysis. Unable to transcend the traditional weak/strong opposition, Flaiano's “inetto” is chained to the constraints of his inadequacy. The encounter with the doctor reinforces not only his powerlessness in the face of others but also in the face of fate. As the narrator says of the infirm Anna in Tozzi's *Con gli occhi chiusi*, “Le sembrava di non appartenere più alla vita” (Tozzi, 2004: 43). The lieutenant's weakness, manifested through his inadequacy and through his apparent disease, evokes a similar sensation. More than simply being ill-adapted to life, it is as though he exists *apart* from it.

Our attention now turns to Johannes, the indigenous *askari* (and Mariam's father), and to the Major. While both characters occupy a prominent position within the paradigm of the “confronto inetto-forte”, they also play an instrumental role in the socio-historical narrative. In the case of the Major, the character to whom the large part of the lieutenant's resentment and admiration is directed, we see an echo of the author's experience in 1935-1936, expressed in *Aethiopia: Appunti per una canzonetta*. Exemplifying the archetypal characteristics of a corrupt colonial officer, the Major's illicit business activity, coupled with his gross cultural insensitivity and rapacious “consumption” of both women and alcohol are central to the negative portrayal of the invasion of Abyssinia. Johannes, on the other hand, is juxtaposed to the corrupt official (as well as to the protagonist himself). He is portrayed largely as a dignified, ethically sound and trustworthy character, whose positive characteristics only serve to exacerbate the lieutenant's frustration and resentment: in essence, he reminds the lieutenant of what he is *not* and can never be. Within the context of the “confronto inetto-forte”, these two principal characters precipitate self-revelation in the lieutenant. In the same way that we see a Mariam-“Lei” dichotomy, so we there is broader symbolism in the antithetical presence of the Major and Johannes in the novel.

The link between the fictional Major and the corrupt Italian *maresciallo*, Emilio De Bono, is clear, given that the former's wealth is generated by a similar illegal transport trade in the novel. In his

characteristically dry, satirical tone, Flaiano writes of Emilio De Bono in *Aethiopia: Appunti per una canzonetta*:

Il generale De Bono – ora maresciallo d'Italia – è azionista della Sicelp. (Una società di trasporti semi-ufficiale, che ha anche costruito strade. Altissimi dividendi. C'è qualcosa che ricorda certi papi della rinascenza e la vendita delle indulgenze.) (Flaiano, 1947: 291).

However, the lieutenant in *Tempo di uccidere* does not maintain the same sardonic stance conveyed through the words of the author's diary. Even though the Major's behaviour, demeanour and ethical foundations are portrayed as existing outside of accepted conventions, the lieutenant still deems him worthy of imitation. On one level, the Major represents the dark, and morally questionable aspects of the colonial endeavour. On an individual level, however, the lieutenant's apparent resentment of his superior clearly originates from his feeling of inferiority, which he acknowledges in a characteristically contradictory statement, “invidiavo la sua felicità, la sicurezza della sua esistenza [...] Era convinto che l'ammirassi, ed era vero. Ammiravo i suoi difetti, che forse mi sarebbero stati necessari, questo sentivo, per sopravvivere” (134). In a sense, Flaiano's novel represents a coming to terms with, or rather an exploration of, the *moral* question of invading Abyssinia (and that of engaging in war in general). In a sign of the ethical impoverishment or moral vacuum in which the lieutenant finds himself, he looks up to a wholly unsuitable “role model”, revealing an ambiguous and uncomfortable relationship to authority and to those who wield power.

The bond between the Major and the protagonist is subject to a number of changes which reflect the developments in the plot. Appearing at specific points of the narrative (usually in moments of acute desperation for the protagonist), we see dual forces at play: admiration and vilification (Sergiacomo, 1994: 96). The artifice of friendship established between the characters is founded upon the lieutenant's need for self-affirmation and approval, which he can only attain by being pliable. He compromises any dignity in his search for validation, and in this process any proposal of adherence to principle has to dissolve. Although inherently conscious of his inadequacy, he still pursues the delusions of strength which are perpetuated by his interaction with the Major. Delusions they may be, but it is clear that the lieutenant hopes to acquire both knowledge and fortitude from their friendship, as he seeks to shape his identity. This is illustrated by the following passage, which is not without its ironic nuances:

Poteva, sì, trattarmi come un ragazzo, con la degnazione protettrice che gli uomini molto pratici e fortunati pongono nel trattare i giovani che non lo sono, ma adesso s'era liberato d'ogni invidia [...] E commerciava. Non era il solo. Perciò mi trattava come un ragazzo che deve molto imparare dalla vita, un ragazzo che insegue gli ottimismo e ama gli indigeni perché trova in loro certe virtù che agli altri popoli stanno fortunatamente perdendo. Avendo molto da imparare da lui, di questo eravamo convinti tutte e due (187).

The relationship between the Major and the protagonist is less of a balance than it is a struggle, on the part of the lieutenant, to assert the value of his existence: the need which lies at the heart of the “confronto inetto-forte”. In other words, in his self-perception of weakness and other characters' reassertion of this inadequacy, he is seeking to affirm his presence in the world and to carve out a space which contains meaning and identity. This is rendered explicit in one of the many instances in which we see a heightened sensitivity towards that which he perceives to be the thoughts of others, “Cosa dicevano i due ufficiali, perché ridevano, di *chi* ridevano? Volevo anch'io partecipare, sentirmi vivo con loro, *affermare la mia esistenza* [own italics]” (137). Indeed, when looked at within the context of the other characters in the novel – in effect, those with a capacity to live – the protagonist is afflicted by an existence which cannot be affirmed, as he is incapable of asserting strength or conviction.

In light of the extensive interactions between the lieutenant and the Major, the focus in this chapter placed on specific examples which reveal a broader truth about the nature of their weak/strong opposition and the implications thereof. In their first encounter (soon after the lieutenant has killed Mariam), the Major makes unwanted advances on an indigenous woman. The protagonist reflects:

Presi a ingiurarlo, ma egli seguì a ridere e la sua socievole allegria, invece di calmarmi, aumentò l'inquietudine che mi tormentava. Ero io quell'uomo acceso? Conservavo lettere, fotografie, mi stimavo diverso da tutti gli altri? Ecco, il volto del maggiore si offriva come una bersaglio lungamente atteso. Era certo il volto di una qualsiasi persona, ma in quell'istante le rughe che lo segnavano non erano parole di una vecchia lapide che chiedevano soltanto una traduzione? “Se uccidessi quest'uomo” pensai “seppellirei *anche* la parte peggiore di me stesso” (94).

This passage illustrates the lieutenant's identification with the prurient Major – recognising their commonalities - and his consequent self-disgust. The Major comes to represent the relentless degradation of his character, or rather his descent into iniquity in the aftermath of his initial crime. This is rendered explicit by the lieutenant's conviction that in killing his superior, he would be able to bury the worst part of himself. As in the case of the doctor, his misguided belief that killing those who stand in his path towards absolution once again emerges in this extract. Thus far, however, we have seen how this internal struggle against the realisation of his ineptitude has been comparatively nuanced or implicit. Yet here, rooted in the reflection “Se uccidessi quest'uomo [...] seppellirei *anche* la parte peggiore di me stesso” is in fact an explicit justification for his rationale throughout the course of the novel, explaining his attempted murder of both the doctor and the Major, as well as the aggression shown towards Johannes in the penultimate chapter. Furthermore, one could also contend that the metaphorical assassination of his absent wife in Italy can also be seen thus. In conceivably the most elementary paradox in Flaiano's novel, the protagonist becomes burdened with the weight of his guilty conscience as he continues to flee from or eliminate all

obstacles to his absolution. In other words, he tries to kill people in order to *avoid* the road to perdition.

Recalling the encounter with the doctor, the description of the Major is based primarily on his physical qualities, the most pertinent of which is his capacity for self-indulgence. In essence, he is the physical embodiment of his injurious characteristics, be they excessive alcohol consumption, mistreatment of women or the illicit acquisition of wealth. The lieutenant describes him as:

[...]un uomo alto e grasso, felice di vivere, di stappare bottiglie e di aprire con un gesto largo la scatola delle sigarette, felice di parlare e di ascoltarmi, disposto a perdonarmi il mio giovanile ottimismo [...] Lo detestavo. Anzi: invidiavo la sua felicità, la sicurezza della sua esistenza. La stimavo capace di difendere la sua baracca, le sue casse, il suo denaro, i suoi affari, poiché era chiaro che facesse affari. Dovevo imitarlo, se non volevo soccombere, dovevo considerare il mondo e gli uomini coalizzati contro di me e batterli con astuzia. Era convinto che l'ammirassi, ed era vero. Ammiravo i suoi difetti, che forse mi sarebbero stati necessari, questo sentivo, per sopravvivere (134).

This passage highlights the fact that the lieutenant's perception of his difference is founded upon a deep-seated fear of perceived hostility. This fear is, of course, intimately connected both to his necessarily subjective perception of weakness as well as to the objective reality - namely, his ineptitude - which he is forced to confront. In saying "dovevo considerare il mondo e gli uomini coalizzati contro di me e batterli con astuzia", the lieutenant reveals an acute awareness of both his limitations and of his place within the military hierarchy (and in society at large). Ever more distrustful of others, this is one of the many occasions in which we see his rising suspicion seep through the text. He says, for example, of the platoon commander "voleva significare che non faceva affidamento su di me" (103), of the smuggler "il contrabbandiere mi giudicava male, lo sentivo" (113) and of the Major "stimandomi inadatto alla vita" (192). Furthermore, the dual forces of admiration and vilification are discernible in this extract, and continue to re-emerge throughout the rest of the novel. Moving between an indictment of the Major's depraved behaviour and a veneration of his strength, the protagonist is unable ever to reconcile his conflicting emotions. We are again, therefore, alerted to his inexorable psychological paralysis as he lies suspended in a form of existential *impasse*. The protagonist's lack of perspective and proportion lends itself to rampant, almost obsessive self-pity. His heightened self-consciousness, ubiquitous in the novel, is in fact a form of pathology, and one sees little indication of an actual desire to escape this state of perpetual angst.

In the closing pages of the chapter entitled *Il dado e la vite* the weak-strong opposition between the Major and the lieutenant reaches its apex. The protagonist agrees to assist his superior in one of his corrupt endeavours, in return for a fee which will then aid his passage back to Italy. Without doubt,

this demonstrates his willingness to favour expediency over an ethically sound decision-making framework. Sabotaging the truck so that it will crash on a winding descent, the lieutenant seizes an opportunity to steal the Major's money, and then watches his adversary continue to drive to that which he assumes to be certain death. However, as is the case of the doctor, his almost farcical assertion of strength is almost immediately transformed into a manifestation of his ineptitude, as the truck remains intact while the lieutenant observes it moving into the distance. While it is evident that in each chapter of *Tempo di uccidere* there is a discernible climax, one could argue that this episode acts as the climax of the narrative as a whole: since the Major represents the lieutenant's last remaining chance of salvation, the fact that he tries and fails to kill him is the ultimate manifestation of his inadequacy.

Within a matter of paragraphs, the lieutenant's tone changes from one of triumph to one of desperation. Initially, questioned by the Major over the stolen money, the lieutenant indignantly exclaims, “ 'Ma sì, l'ho preso io e lo tengo'. Era un colpo giusto, perché rimase stupito, incapace di rispondere, la collera e la sorpresa la stavano soffocando” (196). This ephemeral position of power is rendered all the more ridiculous by the laughter which accompanies the lieutenant's illusion of victory, “Allora risi anch'io e, quando il camion partì feci automaticamente il saluto militare. E seguitai a ridere, preso da un'ilarità che mi sollevava” (199). Perhaps it is because of this laughter, a nervous mechanism to becalm his uncertainties, that he paints a pitiful, almost pathetic figure at the close of this chapter. The protagonist reflects that the truck, with the Major still at the wheel, “avanzava con una lentezza che era per me la più crudele irrisione, e il suo ritardo mi diceva che il maggiore aveva scoperto il danno ponendovi riparo [...]Ora, a che mi sarebbe servito quel denaro? Lo contai, erano cinquantamila lire” (199). As a consequence, having exhausted all his options, the lieutenant – by his own doing - is condemned to remaining a prisoner, subjected to both a figurative and a literal incarceration on the Abyssinian plateau.

It is in the penultimate chapter of *Tempo di uccidere* that we see the intersection of the circular narrative with the chronological development of the plot. The lieutenant's efforts at finding either compunction or a means to return to Italy having proved fruitless, he finds himself once more being pulled towards Johannes's village and the site of Mariam's grave. The figure of the old *askari* is pertinent throughout the novel as he is, in essence, a stain on the protagonist's conscience and a reminder of his inadequacy. Like Elias, Johannes acts as a *aide-mémoire* of Mariam, and thus of the lieutenant's “original sin”. As the plot draws to a close, the conventional power balance of coloniser and colonised is inverted. In yet another paradox, the protagonist is forced to seek refuge in the village, trusting Johannes to protect him from the military authorities. The balance of power

in the interaction between the two men during this period is subject to a number of changes; it is infused with feelings of guilt and anger on the part of the lieutenant, and resentment on the part of Johannes. Indeed, Johannes challenges the lieutenant to his very core. Incapable of tolerating or understanding the origins of his insolence, the Italian becomes increasingly frustrated with the serenity with which Johannes completes his daily tasks, which is in striking contrast to his own psychological turmoil. The *askari* is in perfect contraposition to the protagonist, who battles with delirium, is progressively weakened by disease and cannot act on his intentions to leave the village. As Sergiacomo notes, “egli trova il suo alter ego in Johannes, vecchio santone capace di lunghi silenzi e immobilità, immerso nelle sue abituali occupazioni che tanto innervosiscono il giovane ufficiale straniero, bisognoso di protezione” (Sergiacomo, 1994: 50).

In spite of the lieutenant's conspicuous need for protection, which immediately implies a position of weakness, he remains at pains to arrogantly assert his official authority over Johannes. Through a careful choice of words, illustrated for example by “Gli fece cenno che non doveva andar via e, allora, *obbedì* [own italics]” (211), he establishes a transitory and essentially spurious position of superiority. Nonetheless, Johannes, unlike his colonial “master”, enjoys relative freedom. Notwithstanding this crucial distinction between the two men, the Italian still lives under the illusion of primacy. However, this is openly and consistently challenged by the *askari*'s behaviour, which does not go unnoticed by the lieutenant, evident in “Infine, disse: ‘Sei padrone di restare’ e lo disse seccamente, ma non voleva essere scortese. Riconosceva il mio diritto” (211). Paramount here is the fact that although the protagonist clearly acknowledges that he is an intruder, he still clings onto the notion of his preordained right over his colonial subject. It is, in effect, the only mechanism he has left in his bid to negate his inherent weakness, and this adoption of a “colonialist” stance is his last remaining line of defence. Once more, one sees in the lieutenant the triumph of expediency over an adherence to the principles of a sound moral compass.

In keeping with the trend present throughout the narrative, certain established textual signals alert the reader to the way in which the lieutenant imagines the “confronto inetto-forte”: essentially as a battle. Indeed, scattered references to “vittoria” and “lotta” frame the moments of overt friction between him and the *askari*. For example, in the first veiled challenge to the lieutenant's presence, Johannes serves him an almost inedible snack, which he succeeds in finishing without displaying his obvious discomfort. This is seen to be the protagonist's first victory, “Mi accorsi che avevo vinto [...] Era la prima vittoria e seppi sfruttarla mangiando in silenzio” (217), and from this point onwards one sees the formal foundation of a contested struggle between Johannes and the inept colonial officer. A similar mechanism is apparent in Svevo's *La Coscienza di Zeno*, with the

principal character often referring to victory in the context of his relationships with other characters in the novel, most frequently his opposition with Guido. During his courtship of Ada, he reflects “la vittoria ebbe subito l'effetto che non poteva mancare in un uomo fatto come son io” (Svevo, 2010: 123), although this is quickly discounted by the value of hindsight, “se avessi avuto un orecchio sensibile, avrei sentito che, ma più, in una lotta con lui, la vittoria avrebbe potuto essere mia” (Svevo, 2010: 124). Frequently one sees the transposition of the lieutenant's perception of weakness onto his adversary, as he derogates him as an inferior human being, as is illustrated in the citation below. However, as is to be expected by this stage of the novel, the protagonist's attempt at proclaiming his own strength is almost immediately undercut by his inescapable self-doubt. Hence, even his imperious overtone is undermined by his own admission, that Johannes “era capace delle più meditate vendette”:

Quel gesto infantile mi fece sorridere. “L'ira di Johannes” pensai “è breve come il tempo che gli resta da vivere”. Se non sa tenersi da certe ridicole proteste vuol dire che è un essere debole. Meglio così, rompendo quel ramo ha placato tutto il suo rancore, come i bambini che picchiano lo spigolo del tavolo contro il quale battono la testa. Ora si stima vittorioso e quell'illusione lo renderà sopportabile [...] Eppure, mentre mi dicevo queste cose, sentivo che Johannes era capace delle più meditate vendette, la durezza di quegli occhi mi suggeriva che i suoi ingenui trasporti volevano soltanto nascondere una perfida manovra (230-231).

Thus, the notion of victory, like that of his continually unfulfilled resolutions, can only be treated with scepticism. Not only is the protagonist unable to “win” per se, but he is also incapable of believing in his *capacity* for victory. Similarly, there is a perceptible emptiness to his repeated resolutions to leave the village, which he fails to fulfill. Here, too, there is an underlying sensation that the lieutenant has fallen prey to a lack of self-belief, as he becomes progressively aware of the constraints of his ability and of the illusions he constructs for himself. In fact, it is only after he partially resolves his internal conflict and edges towards expiation that finds the strength to leave his place of hiding. In other words, it is only through his acceptance of guilt and his recognition of weakness that he is able to free himself from the questions of his consciousness.

Needless to say, Johannes, on the other hand, is firmly situated in a position of strength. Unlike the Italian, he is depicted as being at peace with his environment (it is his native environment, after all), impervious to the effect of the supposedly hostile landscape which threatens the protagonist's cast of mind. Moreover, he enjoys a freedom which, for the lieutenant, is essentially unattainable. This freedom should not be understood only as a physical reality, but also as an ontological condition. Placed in opposition to the master of illusions, namely the Italian lieutenant, by contrast Johannes is free because Flaiano portrays him as not being blind to the realities of existence. This argument is open to debate, given that it is Johannes's unwillingness to accept the existence of Mariam which

becomes the fulcrum around which the weak/strong opposition rotates. However, bearing in mind the tragedies which he has been forced to endure, there is a poignant stoicism which emerges through his character. The author, in effect, attributes an ease of being to Johannes, in stark contradistinction to the lieutenant's anguish. It is a quality which the protagonist is not only incapable of ignoring or emulating, but which he openly admires:

[...]Johannes, profeta senza popolo, che aveva nelle ossa la verità di quelle sentenze senza conoscerne una. Johannes era un saggio e nemmeno sapeva di esserlo. Aveva bandito il mondo da sé e viveva accanto ai suoi morti [...] Era questa la sua forza, la forza di stare accanto ai suoi morti e di vivere con essi gli ultimi giorni. Egli non se lo poneva come una penitenza, per meritarsi un Paradiso, ma per sentirsi in buona compagnia [...] Pensavo che questa sua forza l'avevo perduta né avrei potuto riacquistarla, e pensavo agli squallidi cimiteri delle nostre città (249).

Here, one sees a reversal in the protagonist's imagination of the weak/strong opposition, as he portrays himself as being unable to ever reach the strength with which Johannes is endowed. In addition, there is a further reversal of what we can call a "socio-cultural opposition", in that the coloniser begins to admire the colonised. Although some may argue that this prelapsarian image of an Africa untainted by modernity falls directly into the trap of exoticist discourse, it could be equally argued that this is an explicit indictment of the impact of modernity on Western society³³. Nonetheless, this is a fleeting moment of existential clarity. The lieutenant's recognition of Johannes's strength and admiration for his qualities does not translate into a significant shift in his behaviour towards the colonial subject. In fact, it is after this central point in the weak/strong opposition that the tension between the protagonist and the *askari* reaches its apotheosis. Once again, the protagonist decides to resort to murder and, once again, he fails.

Another feature of the traditional literary "inetto" is the inability to capitalise on opportunities which arise as potential means of asserting strength or superiority. Svevo's Zeno is incapable of making the most of his context and killing of Guido, and cites a trivial excuse as a means of explaining his weakness. He says "Debbo confessare ch'io in quel momento m'accinsi veramente ad uccidere Guido! [...]Egli giaceva sulle proprie braccia incrociate dietro la schiena, e sarebbe bastata una buona spinta improvvisa per metterlo senza rimedio fuori d'equilibrio [...] Come avrei potuto dormire se avessi ammazzato Guido? Quest'idea salvò me e lui" (121). This cycle of reasoning is certainly familiar to a reader of Flaiano's novel. Towards the close of the penultimate chapter, the underlying hostility is transformed into open confrontation, and the lieutenant is faced with an

³³ This disillusionment with contemporary culture which later in Flaiano's career found expression in his satirical writings is echoed in a 1972 interview with the writer, when he expresses his idea of true "culture": "[...]bisogna cominciare a rinunciare a quello che noi siamo, cioè alla nostra 'cultura' tra virgolette: perché la vera cultura è un'altra, è quello che sanno gli analfabeti in un certo senso, cioè come vivere nell'ambiente, come non offenderlo, come rispettare gli altri. Questa è la cultura [...]" (as quoted in Corti, 2001: 1236).

angry and inebriated Johannes who “gettò un urlo forsennato, un urlo che ghiacciò il sangue, era l'urlo che aveva in gola da molto tempo” (258). Sergiacomo notes that it is in this altercation that we see a further example of the weak/strong opposition, “Il tenente ha vinto per una volta, ma la sua inettitudine gli impedisce di godere del vantaggio finalmente ottenuto, non si sente infatti capace di affrontare di nuovo la prova di uccidere e anzi alla vittoria segue la capitolazione, la confessione del delitto (Sergiacomo, 1994: 50).

Even though the lieutenant declares “Fu sentendolo ridere [...] decisi di ucciderlo. Dovevo ucciderlo e andarmene” (259), he rapidly realises that he is unable to convert this conviction, like all those which have preceded it, into reality. In a candid self-revelation of his ineptitude, he reflects “Stavo per avvicinarmi alla capanna, quando mi accorsi che non avrei sparato. Non avrei potuto sparare; e non per repulsione, ma per impotenza. Fallito il colpo del dottore e poi del maggiore, mi sentivo incapace di di affrontare di nuovo la prova [...] “Si,” dicevo “ucciderlo. Ma non ci riuscirò” (261). In accepting his inherent weakness and shedding the tentative illusions of *puissance* which have hitherto come to define his character, the protagonist is finally able to confront, and insofar as it is possible resolve, the pervasive questions of his conscience. While the conclusion to this chapter remains characteristically ambiguous, there is a discernible move towards a “resolution” of sorts, although it is by no means conventional. The weak/strong opposition has reached an equilibrium. The acknowledgement of the existence of Mariam, the common thread which binds the lieutenant and Johannes (and which is the root of the existentialist narrative as a whole), hereby brings both the circular and the linear narrative to a conclusion.

Before ending, there are two other figures contributing to the development of the weak/strong opposition in this penultimate chapter: Elias and the mule. In spite of being an animal, the “mulo della Sussistenza” initially shares a common affliction with the lieutenant. Both find themselves far away from home, and both are plagued by disease. The mule, however, recovers quickly and builds a relationship with Johannes which the lieutenant is incapable of emulating. He says of the mule “appariva più florido, forse sarebbe guarito. Quel giorno, sul sentiero, quando se n'era fuggito portando via la mia roba, avevo esitato a sparargli appunto perché lo vedevo già condannato; ma ora, che sembrava volersi riprendere, l'invidiavo, sentendomi mille volte più colpito di lui, che stava trovando almento il conforto della libertà” (218). Further reinforcing the lieutenant's feeling of inadequacy, the fact that he is weaker than an animal precipitates his descent into desperation both in the face of Johannes's insolence and in the face of his perceived degenerative disease. Similarly Elias, once an impecunious and attention-seeking child, re-emerges in this chapter as the strong antithesis to the now dishevelled protagonist. Again, we see the inversion not only of “colonial”

roles but also of adult-child relations, as the older lieutenant relies on the younger Elias to procure cigarettes and to ensure him of his safety in the village³⁴. Unlike the Italian, Elias “era libero, indipendente, viaggiava per suo conto [...] Per un attimo lo invidiai e quella sua sicurezza, da uomo già fatto, mi indispettì persino” (253). In perhaps the most candid admission of the reversal of roles and in the weak/strong opposition with Elias, the lieutenant reflect “si allontanò, ma stavolta senza saltellare, padrone del sentiero, piccolo David che aveva vinto il gigante” (256). This allegory in fact encapsulates the “confronto inetto-forte” in its entirety. Provided with the opportunity to play the allegorical role of David, the lieutenant is constrained always to be Goliath.

In conclusion, the symbolism attached to the lieutenant's attempts on both the doctor and the Majors' lives is earlier rendered explicit by his own words, “Il maggiore e il dottore, due pietre da togliere dal sentiero e da scagliare sulla tomba di Mariam, su quell'inappagata tomba” (192). In the final stages of the novel, he is left without those metaphorical stones to throw onto his victim's grave in order to silence the questions of his conscience and to liberate himself from the suffocating chains of guilt. His gradual descent into psychological turpitude has thus reached its nadir, and it is Johannes who rather ironically becomes the catalyst for his regeneration. It is worth re-emphasising here that this “regeneration” does not fall into conventional lines of literary interpretation. In other words, as is true of the close of Svevo's *La Coscienza di Zeno*, one is not left with the impression that the realisation of ineptitude and the acceptance of destiny as an uncontrollable force has resulted in a form of rebirth. In fact, the conclusion is as vague as the events which have so far defined the development of the plot. Although Johannes cures the sores on the lieutenant's hands and, in so doing, brings the theme of malaise to a close, the “regeneration” we see in the protagonist is one which is characterised by a recognition of, and resignation to, his inadequacies and limitations. Rather than being a novel about triumph over adversity (as the word regeneration would imply), *Tempo di uccidere* is instead clearly framed by the notion of the fragmentation of the individual and the realisation of humanity's powerlessness in the face of destiny.

Whether the doctor, Elias, Johannes, the mule or even the anonymous women in the square, the other characters forming part of the theme of the weak/strong opposition are all sources of profound psychological torment. In effect, they serve as constant reminders of his guilt, repeatedly forcing him back to the core of his conscience, which in spite of his attempts at self-delusion, he still has. The weak/strong opposition sees other characters inadvertently directing the protagonist towards the opposition within himself. The nugatory displays of strength reveal as much about the

³⁴ This theme of the child taking initiative, acting as a harbinger of a better future, is echoed in neorealist films of the period. See, for example, Edmund in *Germania Anno Zero* (1948), Bruno in *Ladri di biciclette* (1948), and Marcello in *Roma città aperta* (1945).

theme of ineptitude as does the protagonist's perception of his weakness. The actual conflict which lies at the heart of the “confronto inetto-forte” is not between the protagonist and the “pillars of strength” whom he encounters along his journey. Rather, the conflict which arises from the opposing forces of weakness and strength originates in the individual. In fact, one could argue that this conflict represents the clash between the lieutenant's aspirations and the realisation of his limitations, between the conscious illusions he constructs for himself and the nature of the piercing reality with which he is confronted. Therefore, characters such as the doctor, Johannes and the Major need to be understood as performing a revelatory function in terms of the characterisation of the protagonist. Essentially, it is through their various interactions that the reader edges closer to the ontological crisis which the lieutenant faces: one in which his subjective perception of difference, as well as his objective weakness, exemplify his inability to “live”. He is, in effect, at once a product of a given society but inevitably also its victim. This elevates the novel from being purely an exploration of the Italo-Ethiopian War and the nature of the colonial experience to being a coherent example of Modernist literature *post-factum*.

5.3 Revelation and resignation: Concluding thoughts

“Mi chiedevo se quella era la rassegnazione, quel vuoto aspettare, contando i giorni come i grani di un rosario, sapendo che non ci appartengono, ma sono giorni che pure dobbiamo vivere perché ci sembrano preferibili al nulla” (251).

Without doubt, the theme of ineptitude in Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere* forms the principal foundation of the text. Perpetually weak, inadequate and a slave to self-constructed illusions, the Italian lieutenant paints a marginalised figure, existing apart from the conventional structures of society. In this manner, therefore, Flaiano has here refashioned the established figure of the “inetto” and placed him into a specific historical context. Thus, the significance of the protagonist's inadequacy can be interpreted on both an individual and on a collective, or rather political, level. Given that critical examinations of the “inetti” of earlier decades take into account the historical context in which they emerge, it is only fair that the ineptitude of *Tempo di uccidere* is subject to similar enquiry. Sergiacomo argues that “con i dovuti cambiamenti cronologici e politici, anche il romanzo di Flaiano dovesse essere interpretato in tal senso [...] l'inettitudine del protagonista dovrebbe allora esprimere la sfiducia e il rifiuto della politica imperialista del Fascismo, il defilarsi di front al mito risorgente della grande patria” (Sergiacomo, 1994: 52). However, as Sergiacomo goes on to argue, a purely historical, and in that sense realist, reading of the function of ineptitude would deny one of most pivotal elements of *Tempo di uccidere*: that of its “antirealism”. Often the novel challenges its historical and literary context, and much like its principal character, seems to exist *apart* from it (Sergiacomo, 1994: 52).

As demonstrated in this chapter, the inadequacy which characterises Flaiano's protagonist manifests itself in a multitude of ways. Whether it is his overriding sense of alienation, his inability to follow through on his intentions or his weakness in the face of his fellow characters, he is trapped by the illusions he has created for himself. These illusions, a desperate attempt to escape his reality, serve only to highlight his irredeemable incompetence. Through the course of the plot, the effect of his chain of failures is frequently exacerbated by his self-deception; that which is obvious to the reader seems to be beyond the recognition or understanding of the protagonist. Flashes of clarity and honest self-reflection, the product of the second narrative voice, are filtered through the text, reminding us of the multifaceted nature of the narrative perspective. That said, the protagonist relies on these self-constructed illusions of strength and aptitude. This psychological mechanism is his way of coping with his menacing surroundings and with the angst-inducing uncertainty which torments him. Interpreting the novel as an extended allegory, the characters clearly perform a

significant symbolic and catalytic function in the protagonist's journey. Gradually stripping him of the illusions to which he holds on so strongly, his interactions with his absent wife, Mariam, the Major, the doctor and Johannes bring him closer to understanding his fragmented and indefinable existence. Stemming from his initial crime and concluding with Johannes curing his disease (at least superficially so), the lieutenant's journey through Abyssinia reveals a truth shared by Zeno Cosini: the irony that doubt is the only certainty in life. In this manner, Abyssinia functions as a metaphor for that which is unknowable. The novel is, in essence, a critique of the prevalent Western model that asserts that everything is "knowable". Abyssinia, therefore, represents an epistemological crisis, and the lieutenant's experience echoes the notion that we cannot be sure of what we know.

Thus, like the famous literary "inetti" of earlier decades, the inadequacy of Flaiano's lieutenant represents more than simply an inability to realise his intentions. It is a metaphysical condition, rooted in an unwillingness, or an incapacity, to conform to the expectations of society. The Western man, part of the imperial machinery, is psychologically and ethically at sea in an alien environment, which ironically proves to be more "authentic" than his own. Acutely dismissive of the notion of an objective reality, the protagonist subverts our understanding of ourselves, and in another echo of Svevo's Zeno, "scopre che alla radice della vita c'è l'inquinamento, la malattia, la solitudine, il dubbio, l'assurdità: per liberarla da tanto male non c'è che un rimedio, la sua totale distruzione" (Di Giacomo, 1968: 120). While the apocalyptic at the close of *La Coscienza di Zeno* is absent from *Tempo di uccidere*, the Italian lieutenant remains afflicted with the self-doubt which has come to characterise his being. However, this perpetual suspension, an incarceration of the psyche, also represents the possibility of looking at his life anew. Resigning himself to the limitations of his existence, Flaiano's anti-hero becomes a prototype for an individual, "che non guarderà più attorno a sé, ma dentro di sé [...] il personaggio mito del sotteraneo del subconscio" (Di Giacomo, 1968: 79)³⁵.

³⁵ While this is taken from Di Giacomo's critical reading of *La Coscienza di Zeno*, this is a patent echo of the meaning of Flaiano's principal character. The way in which critical analyses are so easily interchangeable when looking at Svevo, Pirandello and Flaiano is undoubtedly a further indication of the latter's "literary nostalgia".

Chapter Six

“Si diventa lebbrosi come si diventa tiranni: eredità o contagio” (156).

The body as a canvas for change: Disease in *Tempo di uccidere*

6. The body as a canvas for change: Disease in *Tempo di uccidere*

Le piaghe non si discutono, ma si accettano (157).

La malattia è una convinzione e io nacqui con quella convinzione (Svevo, 2010: 11).

Given the symbiotic relationship between the themes of ineptitude and disease, many of the philosophical notions that emerge through a study of the lieutenant's afflictions have already been raised in the preceding three chapters. In order to avoid unnecessary repetition, therefore, this short chapter adopts a more general approach to the text, looking at the development of the theme of disease and its consequent impact on the ontological narrative. Entrenched in the literary milieu of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the emergence of the interconnected themes of ineptitude and disease is closely linked to evolutions in Western philosophical thought. As illustrated in Chapter Three, *Literary Precedents*, the exploration of the realm of consciousness and subjective experience towards the end of the 19th century ruptured earlier, dearly-held notions of a rational, intelligible existence framed by a fixed, knowable reality. It is from this socio-cultural context that one can trace the origins of the fragmented reality and alienation present in, amongst others, the works of Tozzi, Musil and Pirandello. This idea has had a long genesis in the history of Italian literature, manifesting itself in Petrarch's *abulia*, Leopardi's "torto di nascere" or in Michaelstaedter's fear of living - exemplified by his refusal to compromise with life as it had presented itself. The theme of disease in *Tempo di uccidere* is hence a further example of Flaiano's "literary nostalgia". As we know, the novel is set in a colonial era, written in post-fascist Italy and drawing on themes largely associated with Italian and European Modernism of the *Primo Novecento*. The sheer scope of these multiple influences profoundly shapes this work, with its avenues of potential interpretation which transcend the dimensions of a given literary or historical period. Ultimately, the themes of ineptitude, difference and disease are of enduring relevance, representing a crisis of values which could be applicable to the bourgeois society of the early 20th century, fascist Italy or even, more recently, to the twilight years of Silvio Berlusconi.

Although disease in early 20th century European literature is treated in a diverse manner by its literary exponents, by and large its presence is founded upon shared philosophical premises. For some, like Thomas Mann in *Der Zauberberg*, physical disease becomes a means through which he is able, *inter alia*, to explore the relationship of the artist to life, "malattia che è la premessa dell'arte, anzi si identifica quasi sempre con l'arte" (Guglielmino, 1971: 141). For Svevo, his ailments are profoundly connected to his psyche, and the tangible manifestation of his limp, for example, is less important than what his limp comes to *represent*. In *Tempo di uccidere*, Flaiano

does not restrict himself to a single manifestation of literary disease. Essentially, his sickness includes both the physical and the psychological: the protagonist's body itself becomes a metaphor, with his "malattia" acting as the crucible in which ontological considerations and his material reality are combined. In the lieutenant, one sees a dependence, or rather an obsession, with the *idea* of his affliction. However, this cognitive imagination is also matched with tangible pain: be it his toothache, or the sores on his hands and stomach. Unlike Svevo's Zeno, whose imagined "disease of 54 movements" is a result of his psychological ruminations, the disease which assails the lieutenant has a marked physical presence in the novel. In other words, Flaiano goes beyond the neurosis present in many early 20th century authors, whether it be *ennui* and indifference in Moravia, separation and alienation in Camus, madness in Pirandello or nausea in Sartre, for all of whom disease recalls aspects of the realm of the subconscious (Sergiacomo, 1994: 52). By contrast, in *Tempo di uccidere*, the interdependence of disease and ineptitude is developed further, with the body acting as a locus for the synthesis of physical and metaphysical self-awareness. As Sergiacomo proposes, "Perché il corpo venga utilizzato come transfert dell'espiazione, perché il processo sia evidente e convincente, la malattia deve essere terribile, deve prevedere una deformazione visibile che sia la metafora della deformazione dello spirito causato dalla colpa commessa" (Sergiacomo, 1994: 52).

Gian-Paolo Biasin, in his analysis of *La Coscienza di Zeno*, argues that more than being simply a symptom of a character's marginalisation from society, Zeno's ailments are tinged with ideological difference. In Svevo's context this is founded upon a profound disenchantment with – and indictment of – the decaying bourgeois society of 1914. He quotes Lukàcs to argue that there is "above all, an escape into the pathological as a 'moral protest against capitalism,' a protest which, however often lacks 'a sense of direction' and expressed only 'nausea, or discomfort or longing' (Biasin, 1967: 89). To apply Biasin's argument to *Tempo di uccidere*, one sees that the lieutenant is confined to always existing *apart* from society at large, as he is unable to find a "compromise between the ideal and reality, between his longing and the mechanical possibilities" (Biasin, 1967: 92). Projecting this argument onto the post-Second World War socio-historical canvas, it is clear that in the Italian lieutenant one sees far more than just a story of an individual burdened with disease and his relentless inadequacy. In transcending "the personal", the significance of the lieutenant's malaise recalls Flaiano's own disillusionment with his society. More than an elaborately disguised critique of the Italian colonial project, the author calls into question the reality of post-1945 political, artistic and social culture. Indeed, the acerbic Flaiano, much like his lieutenant, largely distanced himself from his immediate political, social and ideological environment (Trubiano, 2010: 58). Unlike his fictional creation, however, this "marginalisation"

was self-imposed, the result of an unwillingness to pander to the ideological and political master narrative of the post-1945 era. As Marisa Trubiano asserts:

A subtle deconstruction of the ideal of *italianità* underlies a significant part of Flaiano's cultural criticism. The most troublesome characteristics of the Italian character, spanning the prewar to the post-war periods, include a penchant for political rhetoric, celebration and commemoration, partisanship and authoritarianism, rampant cultural consumption and imperialism, racism and chauvinism (Trubiano, 2010: 150).

The strong correlation between artist and disease highlighted by Guglielmino sees the reconfiguration of sickness into a symbol for the incapacity of the artist to live a "normal" life according to conventions of contemporary bourgeois society. As the critic writes of Thomas Mann, "si incontra più frequentemente un tipo, un mito umano segnato dal carattere della diversità, della estraneità al mondo borghese, attratto all'avventura spirituale, lontano dalla *schietta naturalezza*, dalla *gioventù vittoriosa*, e vicino quindi alla malattia (in un senso largo del termine)" (Guglielmino, 1971: 141). In *Tempo di uccidere* there is less of a sense of a spiritual refuge sought in the Abyssinian plateau than there is of a fear of the hostile environment far from the familiarity of a *caffè* on a given *Via Garibaldi* in Rome, Milan or Naples. Common to both novels, however, is that the topography of the mountain (for Hans Castorp) and the harsh, arid plateau (for Flaiano's lieutenant) form the spaces in which their respective drama is enacted. Recalling the symbolism of tuberculosis in *Der Zauberberg*, in the Italian novel this alienation finds its optimal expression in the disease with which he believes himself to be infected: leprosy. It is the ultimate disease of alienation, condemning the lieutenant to remaining in perpetuity, both literally and figuratively speaking, an "untouchable".

Although based on inadequacy, this manifestation of an incapacity to live as others do can also be viewed in a favourable light. It represents the refusal of the individual to conform to a mode of existence which, to his mind, is founded upon questionable premises. In effect, it is an indictment of the dependence on the illusion of certainty in a world which is intrinsically transient and suffused with doubt (in other words, "unknowability"). *Alla Svevo*, further punctuating the Modernist aesthetic of the novel, this notion sees life conceived of as:

un 'viaggio' alla cui spiegazione può soltanto contribuire l'occhio che lo guardi in distanza, la morte come accettazione della realtà; la malattia (l'aspetto patologico del presente) riflessa in una continua vecchiaia, nell'aspettazione, prima tragica poi ironica, della inevitabile conclusione [...] un cammino tragico che non offre soluzioni o scelte di sorta, ma si determina al contrario come realtà 'in progresso' (Bon, 1977: 52).

In the same way that the question of whether Zeno Cosini can be considered either a tragic or heroic figure, so in Flaiano's anti-hero does a similar dialectic arise. The questions of tragedy and irony

are combined with the presence of the absurd in the novel. On one hand, the protagonist is overwhelmed by the thought of a “tragic” future: one in which the regular rhythms of his life, such as being with his wife or reading daily newspapers in Italy, are no longer present. On the other hand, however, his disease – *l’aspetto patologico del presente* - has already stripped him of such certainties and forced him to confront the idea of the transitory nature of existence. As Franco Marcoardi writes of Zeno, “‘Malato’ in questo quadro, è chi voglia imporre un ordine definitivo e pretestuoso a questo flusso. Chi voglia ingabbiare da giovane la vita, come da vecchio l’immaginazione che la rivisita” (Marcoardi, 2010: 10). Perhaps the true “malato” is thus not Zeno, the lieutenant or even Mann’s Hans Castorp, who resign themselves to uncontrollable and uncontainable forces and, in so doing, assert strength in their weakness. It is an idea which recalls Thomas Mann’s explanation - paraphrasing a critic - of his character, Hans Castorp:

[...] sickness and death, and all the macabre adventures his hero passes through, are just the pedagogic instrument used to accomplish the enormous heightening and enhancement of the simple hero to a point far beyond his original competence. What he comes to understand is that one must go through the deep experience of sickness and death to arrive at a higher sanity and health; in just the same way that one must have a knowledge of sin in order to find redemption (Mann, 1999: 726).

Within the broader structure of Flaiano’s work one could argue that it is disease which unifies the seemingly disparate and often ambiguous elements of the plot, and disease which provides the impetus for the theme of ineptitude. The toothache which is the initial pretext from which the lieutenant’s journey stems, “una parodia di malattia proprio per la sua assoluta irrilevanza e banalità” (Barberi Squarotti, 1994: 11), leads him to the short cut, a physical and metaphorical deviation from his intended path. The symbolic intersection of these two motifs – that of disease and of the short cut – is made explicit by inversions in the text. At the start of the novel, the lieutenant reflects “Proseguii: sapevo che le scorciatoie si accettano, non si discutono”, while towards the conclusion it is the second lieutenant who tells him “le piaghe non si discutono, ma si accettano” (279). In equating disease to the symbolic significance of the short cut, Sergiacomo argues that it is implied that the former is merely “il trasferimento per la via più breve di mali morali e psichici sul piano fisico, un’autoespiazione inconscia del delitto commesso, che utilizza il corpo per punire” (Sergiacomo, 1994: 51). A similar mechanism, she goes on to argue, is evident in Hans Castorp of Mann’s *Der Zauberberg*, for whom disease is a means by which he is able to maintain a presence outside of conventional society, a refuge from the common obligations of work and responsibility (Sergiacomo, 1994: 52). For both “inetti”, illness is a means, subconscious or otherwise, with which they are able to separate themselves from society and in the process reach a greater understanding of Being. On the surface, there appears to lie a deep paradox in this assertion, since disease is also a physical manifestation of their respective alienation. This paradox, however,

rests on the erroneous assumption that the protagonist desires to become part of the society in which he is much maligned. In addition, it also rests on the flawed assumption that he *is able to* be accepted by the society which surrounds him, a feat which is forever out of reach for the “inetto”. The lieutenant, like other renowned “inetti” of the early 20th century, does not share the premises upon which his society is founded, and thus does not necessarily desire to conform to a conception of existence that is already diseased.

That it is a pain as minor as a toothache which forces the lieutenant to abandon his “diritta via” is significant in the metaphorical development of the theme of disease. This initial trivial ailment is symbolic of the mediocrity which lies at the core of the “inetto”, which is a contention shared by Giorgio Barberi Squarotti. He argues, along similar lines to Sergiacomo, that disease:

[..]non può essere affatto il segno fisico del male della guerra e della conquista, ma si adatta piuttosto al personaggio mediocre, indeciso, continuamente preda dell'errore e della propria inettitudine a essere “personaggio”, con una precisa parte da sostenere, quella del guerriero e del conquistatore, quale, invece, egli non sa (e proprio per questo è causa di tanti mali, di rovine, di dolori, pirendellianamente) (Barberi Squarotti, 1994: 10).

As the lieutenant plunges further and further into a psychological and existential abyss, so the nature of his affliction – real or imagined - deteriorates. No longer a simple toothache, his increasing conviction that Mariam has infected him with leprosy becomes the guiding force for the remainder of the novel. Although Johannes cures the physical manifestation of his disease - the sores on his hands - the lieutenant is left with the knowledge that leprosy can take years to manifest itself. Thus, while cured of the physical presence of his disease at the close of the novel, he is not liberated from his ontological internment. He remains plagued by the self-doubt, ineptitude and alienation of which his disease was a conspicuous reflection. He is paralysed by the same predicament that befalls Zeno, “to live and at the same time to observe himself living, to be and at the same time to know” (Biasin, 1967: 10) or, to quote Ernest Gellner, “those who need to think about their identity before living it betray their unfitness to live” (Gellner, 1998: 7). As we know, this is not, nonetheless, an apocalyptic entrapment. Aware that the imagined cause of his disease and its cure transcend reason, the enigmatic conclusion reached in the closing chapter seems appropriate within the context of the rest of the novel. The second lieutenant, the sage, reveals the irrational roots of the protagonist’s disease and appeals to a metaphysical explanation, “Qui siamo nella metafisica, e Johannes accetta la metafisica” (279). In so doing he renders tangible, the intangible.

Thus far in the analysis of the existential narrative, the philosophical implications of the protagonist’s experience in Abyssinia have been addressed largely through the lens of the narrative

voice. Furthermore, the lieutenant's feeling of alienation has been illustrated through his interactions with his fellow characters and through his perception of difference. One does, however, see a shift from a predominantly subjective sphere to the "objective", tangible (although not entirely so) manifestation of his angst. Although clearly framed by his perception, the protagonist's constant battle with his "piaghe molto diverse" is in fact a transposition of his internal turmoil onto his physical being. While there are differences in the complexity of the theme of disease in Svevo's *La Coscienza di Zeno* and Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere*, it is important to note that they also share obvious similarities. In both Flaiano's lieutenant and in Svevo's protagonist disease or pain often recurs at crucial points of the plot. Like Zeno, whose limp returns at moments of moral suffering, the lieutenant's toothache, and subsequently his sores, become the central focus in moments of heightened despair. In this manner, the significance of the connection between a psychological or existential state and the appearance of physical ailments is rendered explicit. A comparable mechanism is employed to reinforce the weak/strong polarity, with Johannes and the Major reappearing at moments of psychological weakness to underline the lieutenant's "deplorable debolezza" when confronted with other characters.

In the early stages of the novel, in the chapter aptly entitled *Il dente*, we see repeated references to his toothache in the aftermath of Mariam's murder, "per colpa del dente non ero stato capace di muovermi" (73), "la nausea mi faceva groppo alla gola e il dente cominciava a dolermi"(74), ultimately culminating in the contradiction "Intanto dovevo farmi cavare il dente, che ora non mi doleva più" (87). Di Giacomo writes of Zeno Cosini that "si potrebbe essere indotti ad interpretare, freudianamente, la malattia di Zeno come una punizione che gli viene inflitta della sua coscienza" (Di Giacomo, 1968: 101). This is illustrated by Zeno's reflection, "Quel giorno a tavola, però a tavola, cominciai veramente a soffrire [...] mi sentivo piccolo, colpevole e malato, e sentivo un dolore al fianco come un dolore simpatico che riverberasse dalla grande ferita della mia coscienza" (Svevo, 2010: 160). While the lieutenant in *Tempo di uccidere* rarely, if ever, displays such candid self-understanding, the connection between his physical suffering and his conscience is recurrently emphasised. Although the toothache preceded the lieutenant's encounter with Mariam in the opening chapter, it is only in the aftermath of her death that the pain acquires new meaning. Evidently ceasing to be a result of "troppi dolci" (in spite of the protagonist trying to convince himself otherwise), physical discomfort then comes to signal the oppressive weight of his conscience. As the plot evolves, however, the continual presence of disease adopts wider significance, ultimately embracing questions of full consciousness.

While it is a toothache which provides the pretext for the theme of sickness in *Tempo di uccidere*, it is leprosy which constitutes the principal point of concern for the remainder of the novel. The condition, often associated with the “exotic”, holds significant symbolic meaning that bridges both the socio-historical and the philosophical narratives in the novel. This is demonstrated by the doctor’s prophetic aphorism used for the title of this study: “La lebbra, come l’imperialismo, si cura con la morte”. A disease of the skin, the implications for a conventional colonial (or post-colonial) reading could point towards ideas of race which proved so integral to exoticist discourse. As a degenerative disease, leprosy is also an ideal reflection of the protagonist’s descent into a miasma of ontological and ethical enfeeblement. As the sores become increasingly worse, so he falls further and further into the depths of despair, and *vice versa*. It is, quite evidently, a self-perpetuating cycle from which he is incapable of setting himself free. By his own admission, the lieutenant is hence “un condannato”, condemned to living in a state of irresolution of the self and exposed to the psychological implications thereof.

With the sores on the lieutenant’s hand showing signs of healing at the beginning of Chapter Four, *Piaghe molto diverse*, the lieutenant reflects:

La mano stava guarendo [...] s’era formata un’escrescenza non più grossa di un cece, ma non mi dava fastidio, anzi toccandola quasi non la sentivo [...] Pure non ero soddisfatto. Quando consultai il dottore, questi mi rassicurò dandomi una pomata e attribuendo tutti i miei disturbi alla mancanza di cibi freschi [...] Sì, l’appetito era scomparso e a fatica mi recavo alla mensa, dove non senza disgusto vedevo gli altri gettarsi sulle pietanze con incredibile appetito. La gola mi si chiudeva, dovevo inventare un pretesto per andarmene. *Ma tutto sarebbe passato, il mio male aveva radici momentanee e, durante il viaggio di ritorno in Italia, sul piroscifo, l’aria del mare, la certezza di essere per sempre fuori di quella terra che m’angustiava, m’avrebbero risollevato* [own italics] (130).

In this passage appear a number of elements central to the theme of ineptitude in the text. Even though the sores on his hand no longer disturb him, he cannot alleviate his unease, a nuance illustrated by “Pure non ero soddisfatto”. This uncertainty - of being continually sceptical or unconvinced - characterises the relationship between the protagonist and his disease, both on a figurative and a literal level. He is incapable of joining his fellow soldiers in the canteen, accentuating his feeling of difference which, as we know, forms the foundation of the weak/strong opposition. In addition, this perception of marginalisation has a physical consequence. Not only does he watch them “non senza disgusto”, but he reflects “la gola mi si chiudeva, dovevo inventare un pretesto per andarmene”. Here, we see the return to the “pretext” leitmotiv as the lieutenant resolves, inevitably unsuccessfully, to remove himself from the situation. It is in the closing sentences of the passage that the lieutenant’s view of his disease manifests itself most lucidly. Interpreting his ailment as intrinsically tied not to his state of health but to the context which

surrounds him, these lines are an example of the metaphysical significance which disease acquires for the protagonist. Far from being simply an inconvenience or a source of worry, the sickness which assails him is in fact a physical manifestation of his sense of alienation and of the strangeness of his environment, of “quella terra che m’angustiava”. In the same way that his anxieties are often transposed onto the African landscape, here they are incorporated into his body. Indeed, his physical being is transformed into a space for the negotiation of change. Only with leaving the metaphorical prison of the Abyssinian plateau and returning to the would-be familiarity of Italy does the lieutenant feel that his afflictions will be cured. This is, as the reader is by now well aware, an impossible expectation. The disease which plagues the Italian, and the perceived iniquities of the landscape, are only reflections of his predicament. Burdened by contradictions, the only path towards a cure, both physical and psychological, is the one which guides him towards absolution.

As the plot progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the lieutenant’s sickness assumes a more central position within the narrative, and adds a sense of urgency to the text. It is the reason for which he seeks the advice of the doctor: an encounter which leads him further down his morally questionable path. In trying to escape condemnation not only for his crime but also for his sickness, the protagonist is forced, by virtue of his own inadequacy, to resort to criminal endeavours. However, in a characteristically discordant manner, it is only through admitting the existence of Mariam, and hence accepting responsibility not only for her life but also for her death, that he is freed from the shackles of culpability (or at least superficially so). Accordingly, the transformation in the depiction of Mariam is intricately connected to the state of the lieutenant’s disease. The turning point in the protagonist’s relationship with his victim occurs when, having encountered two women in the square infected with leprosy, his sickness evolves from being a result of malnutrition and a hostile African environment to being a terminal illness contracted from Mariam. It is from this point onwards that repeated references to the notion of condemnation emerge, and the weak/strong opposition between him and Mariam acquires new meaning. No longer is she solely a stain on his conscience, but she is now ironically refashioned into his assassin (Sergiacomo, 1994: 48). With this reconfiguration comes a shift in the lieutenant’s attitude towards his illness, as the interdependence of his conscience and his illness becomes increasingly pronounced. This is illustrated, for example, by “Forse c’era un peggioramento. La mano era tumefatta e, toccandola, percepivo un lontano dolore, come una voce che venisse da un carcere profondo” (144), reinforcing the idea that not only is his conscience a metaphorical prison, but his illness is a physical confirmation of that existential and psychological internment. Furthermore, on seeing an execution of a soldier from a distance, the conflicted lieutenant reflects, “Era quella la *mia* esecuzione, sarebbe quella, e io m’ero alzato in tempo, avevo preso quella strada, avevo scelto il posto migliore

[...]Non era la mia esecuzione, non ero né un disertore né un traditore: ero soltanto un malato. Non si fucila un malato” (184). Essentially, one can trace deterioration in the lieutenant’s state of mind by the tension with which the text is increasingly infused. Ever more insecure, he is stalked by his uncertain inner voice. It is a voice which, by its very nature, will never relent.

In trying to avert the weight of both the law and of medical prerogatives, the lieutenant tries to flee objective confirmation of his guilt and his sickness, both of which form the axis of his marginalisation. In so doing, it appears as though he is fleeing incarceration, whether a prison or a sanatorium. However, the irony lies in the fact that he is already isolated, and that his prison need not be constructed of cement and iron bars in order for it to be “real”. He is, in effect, his own prison. Indeed, it is only with Johannes asking for the lieutenant’s watch towards the close of the penultimate chapter - the watch he had once given to Mariam - that the tension between the two adversaries dissipates. In the tacit mutual admission of the significance of the watch (namely an acknowledgement of Mariam and of the lieutenant’s role in her death), the affliction which hitherto has plagued him ceases to exist. The symbolism of his disease is hence rendered explicit, and resonates in Biasin’s interpretation of Svevo’s Zeno:

Svevo’s iter, in short, is from *tranche de vie* to a life *tout court*, from the absolute of objectivity to the relative of subjectivity [...]the world of objects is no longer a *datum*, a certainty; the world of others is no longer meaningful in itself, in its institutions. What comes to the fore is the awareness of the self, with all the ambiguities and the anguish inherent in the discovery of how unstable, contradictory and absurd the relationships of the self to the world of others and of objects can be (Biasin, 1967: 80).

Over twenty years after the publication of *La Coscienza di Zeno*, Ennio Flaiano published *Tempo di Uccidere*, a novel in which the theme of disease acts as a physical manifestation of a psychological and existential weakness. Much like Svevo’s protagonist, the Italian lieutenant is alienated from the society which surrounds him, conscious of his difference, of his being “inadatto alla vita”. These ambiguities, uncertainties and contradictions which have come to characterise the narrative voice, and consequently the protagonist himself, are echoes of the Svevian notion, “world of objects is no longer a datum”. His disease – real or imagined – can be understood as the objective correlative of this profound ontological and psychological crisis.

As the lieutenant walks away from the village to which he has inadvertently and repeatedly returned, the circular narrative in the novel comes to a close. He reflects that “le piaghe stavano guarendo, Johannes non mi aveva ingannato” (272), and, in an epilogue to the encounter, writes “Passando davanti alla tomba di Mariam, vidi che era coperta da una tettoia di paglia. La sorreggevano i pali che il vecchio aveva tagliato con tanta ostinazione” (272). In this final part of

the novel before the concluding chapter, *Punti oscuri*, the theme of disease draws to a close. With the weight of his conscience somewhat alleviated, the lieutenant is freed, albeit superficially and potentially temporarily, from the tangible manifestations of his psychological and existential afflictions. However, true to the style of the *Tempo di uccidere*, there is no decisive resolution. Still an “inetto”, still unsure of the cause or cure for his disease and still battling with questions of his consciousness, the anonymous Italian lieutenant remains, like Zeno Cosini:

[...]a Dostoievskian hyperconscious man in a minor key: like the underground man he knows the relationship between consciousness and suffering [...] he needs his enslavement to the desire of the Other – an enslavement from which he knows his victory over any particular other will not free him – provided that he can knowingly seek to conceal it from himself. Full consciousness without illusions means *paralysis*, the “disease of the fifty-four movements” (Wilden, 1969: 115).

Of significance here is the notion that full consciousness, stripped of the illusions which plague both Svevo and Flaiano’s protagonists, is in fact at the same time “paralysis”. Given that paralysis is “the *disease* of fifty-four movements”, it could be argued that sickness in *Tempo di uccidere* is in effect a necessary consequence of the lieutenant’s dilemma, namely of his “full consciousness”.

Chapter Seven

“Credo che occorra un certo malessere per discorrere in modo non affatto improprio di Ennio Flaiano” (Gambacorta, 2010: 75).

Conclusion

7.1 Conclusion

Una pessima pomata, che il caldo di quella valle faceva dolciastra, putrida di fiori lungamente marciti, un fiato velenoso. Affrettai il passo, ma la scia di quel fetore mi precedeva (285).

Aptly, it is with this stark image, both evanescent and unsettling, that Flaiano closes *Tempo di uccidere*. An odour redolent of the protagonist's oppressive pangs of conscience, the novel's denouement (with characteristic restraint and ambiguity) encapsulates the largely fragmented – although not incoherent - narrative. Indeed, the final chapter, *Punti oscuri*, provides neither the reader nor the lieutenant with an intelligible resolution. The self-doubt and uncertainty that have dominated the lieutenant's consciousness resonate far beyond the final page, and he remains trapped, confined to his unyielding adequacy. He does not, nevertheless, reject "life" as it were. In refusing to grant the marginalised and inept protagonist the gift of expiation or societal acceptance, Flaiano infuses the text with disquiet. However, as Giuseppe Stellardi writes of the more complex, proto-existentialist Carlo Michaelstaedter, "what in his meditation may appear as destructive and irredeemably negative is probably only the unavoidable dark side of a lamp that never ceases to radiate generosity, altruism, compassion and a profound commitment to life" (Michaelstaedter, 2007: xviii). The same can be said for Ennio Flaiano's vision in *Tempo di uccidere*.

Flaiano and Michaelstaedter adopted different genres and were influenced by distinctly separate socio-historical, cultural, and geographical realities. That notwithstanding, as has been illustrated throughout the course of this study, the ideas that transpire through reading the Pescaran's 1947 opus echo elements of a number of authors from preceding decades. These philosophical notions are distilled through the text, and are readapted to suit Flaiano's unmistakable style: sardonic, absurd, "minimalist" and frequently abstract. In *Tempo di uccidere*, the philosophical implications of the lieutenant's journey are not conveyed in a "heavily intellectual" manner, but rather the protagonist's ontological dilemma primarily emerges through the inconsistencies created by the split first-person narration. Through this literary mechanism, Flaiano undermines and questions the possibility of a defined, harmonious existence, given that reality is inherently unknowable. Ultimately, it is consistent with Flaiano's vision - with his fictional representation of a "slice of life" - that a clear resolution to the protagonist's profound disquiet is absent from the text. In some respects, therefore, *Punti oscuri* represents an "anti-conclusion". In denying the reader the comfort of resolution to the protagonist's plight, Flaiano reflects the broader philosophical concepts that fuel the narrative as a whole (i.e the metanarrative): the anguish that arises from being confronted with unknowability and indefinability of existence, the frustration that the boundaries between reality

and illusion are so fluid, and the powerlessness that man feels when he cannot coerce fate. One could argue that the protagonist encompasses the dilemma of which Ernest Gellner writes, in his theory of “dual citizenship”:

We assume both that we are explicable, like other natural phenomena, and that our key thoughts and values are somehow exempt, extraterritorial [...] Kant’s position was highly coherent and quite outstandingly uncomfortable, more so than the common-sense variants of it. He saw that there was no use supposing that sometimes we were free and at other times we were machines: it had to be both of them together, all the time. Common sense is less coherent and less uncomfortable: instead of insisting on double citizenship all the time, it likes to think that we hop from one side of the boundary to the other arises from two absolutely pervasive features of our world, that is, first, we believe the world we live in susceptible to causal explanation, and second, we believe ourselves to be responsible, at least some of the time, for our thoughts and actions (Gellner, 2003: 102).

The protagonist in *Tempo di uccidere* lives and explores this contradiction. He incorporates age-old, diametrically opposed dualities that emerge in the plot in form of clear polarities: be it the Major and Johannes, Mariam and his wife, “pre-modern Abyssinia” and industrialised Italy, or the dichotomy at the core of his internal struggle. To quote Biasin on Zeno once more, this personal battle emerges in the lieutenant in his attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable, to find a “compromise between the ideal and reality, between his longing and the mechanical possibilities” (Biasin, 1967: 92).

In undermining the significance of the lieutenant’s journey, and ending with that which Sergio Pautasso calls a “nulla di fatto” (Pautasso, 1994: 22) the author has thus reduced the plot to a logical, if perplexing, conclusion. Parodying the would-be military enterprise, Flaiano critiques that which has been endowed with significance by the fascist state, suggesting that, for both perpetrator and victim, the invasion of Abyssinia was, if nothing else, a fraudulent exercise. The lieutenant is at once both victim and perpetrator. Placed in an unfamiliar environment, vastly different from the Africa of his imagination, he is forced simply to react to the impulses of circumstance, is subject to the relentless fluctuations of his consciousness, and is weighed down by the burden of his conscience. Within this state of confusion, reflected clearly in the narrative, the protagonist is propelled to question the very nature of existence. The Italo-Ethiopian War therefore acts as a catalyst, allowing the author to explore the idea of the ill-fated nature of existence, be it in the East African *posto al sole*, or in the streets of post-war Italy. That which we see in the protagonist is a calm acceptance of his fate, and a recognition of his impotence in the face of chance. In the closing chapter, the narrator-protagonist and the second lieutenant (the recurring voice of reason) try to fathom the significance of the former’s journey. This journey, one can argue, is a sustained metaphor for life itself. The second lieutenant concludes, in fact, that it is essentially devoid of discernible meaning, and can be attributed to mere chance:

[...]Ma il massacro conclude un seguito di disgraziate circostanze iniziato dal tuo colpo di rivoltella. E, a sua volta, il tuo colpo di rivoltella conclude un altro seguito di disgraziate circostanze. Quale fu la prima di queste? Se potessimo saperlo, avremmo la chiave della tua storia. Invece, così, ci appare non più importante di una partita di dadi, dove tutto è affidato al caso. Quale fu la prima disgraziata circostanza? L'autocarro rovesciato? Il bivio nascosto dalla carogna? La tua sosta al torrente? La tua parua? La pietra che deviò il colpo? La bestia? O i pacchi di dolciumi che ti inviava Lei? Oppure, semplicemente, il dente che ti doleva? Sarebbe opportuno, almeno, sapere se era il dente del giudizio [...] *Come tutte le storie di questo mondo, anche la tua sfugge a un'indagine* [own italics] (277).

The cyclical narrative sees us returning to the beginning of the novel: to an overturned bus, a toothache, and a deviation from an intended path. It is, in effect, this set of trivial circumstances that can be traced as the root cause of the series of unfortunate events which frame the plot. They are, however, more than simply “unfortunate events” or “disgraziate circostanze”, for they represent the protagonist’s descent into a moral and ontological abyss, illustrated by the collection of seemingly banal situations. Herein lies one of the most important characteristics of the novel. Shying away from a grand narrative, Flaiano exercises restraint in his depiction of the lieutenant’s experience, in his portrayal of the melancholic landscape, and in his cursory development of the novel’s central characters, who tend to remain static. As established, these characters perform a symbolic function, and are instrumental in acting as catalysts for the lieutenant’s self-revelation. Whether the corruption embodied by the Major, the stoicism of the *askari* Johannes, the disillusioned indolence of the doctor, the naivete of “urbanised Mariam” or the “untainted innocence” of Mariam of the plateau, the characters that form part of the novel’s thematic architecture all complement the existential and socio-historical foundation of the lieutenant’s journey. The question that remains, however, how successful is the narrative in *Tempo di uccidere* in highlighting socio-historical and philosophical ends? In other words, do the aesthetics suffer in the author’s desire to convey a specific vision? While certainly open to debate, one contends here that the fragmented narrative, the unfulfilled resolutions and the infinite contradictions in the work successfully complement the thematic cornerstones of the novel. Although at times this makes for a frustrating read, *Tempo di uccidere* can certainly be hailed as an exemplar of a philosophy (and a political vision) rendered in a literary form.

In closing, while this study has aimed to address some of the principal elements of the intersection of the socio-historical with the ontological narrative in Flaiano's novel, there is certainly space for further exploration. In an age in which the release of new information on the nature of Italian colonialism continues to debunk some of the myths entrenched in Italian historiography – that of a kind and gentle form of imperial oppression - *Tempo di uccidere* is of great value to both the historian and the literary critic. Successfully weaving together historical questions with “literary

nostalgia” and existential considerations, an understanding of the novel need not be solely linked to the historical context in which it was written. It is a work that transcends both cultural and temporal boundaries and, through its intentional ambiguity, a crystallised vision of humanity emerges: a vision imbued with doubt, deceit, malaise and ineptitude, but a vision nevertheless. The war in Abyssinia symbolises a Modernist dilemma, in that it is an enterprise that is senseless to Flaiano’s eyes. It represents a lapse of values, a reassertion of a system of beliefs built on illusions of cultural or racial superiority: illusions which are inimical to the author’s understanding of the world, but which permeate the characterisation of his protagonist. Effectively, what we see in *Tempo di uccidere* is the rejection of ideology, a refusal to conform to the coeval neorealist discourse and a lampooning of the trumped-up heroism prevalent in the fascist regime. As a result, there is a paradoxical and perplexing heroism in the anti-heroic figure of the lieutenant, in whom one sees echoes of Svevo’s Zeno, Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov, Mann’s Hans Castorp and Pirandello’s Mattia Pascal. In choosing not to conform to living an existence founded upon an illusory assumption of certitude, the protagonist is allowed to free himself from from the oppressive structures of society.

Flaiano’s characteristic restraint, a pertinent element of the narrative style, contributes to the open-ended nature of the conclusion. As is the case with the rest of the novel, the allusive conclusion suggests more than it says. This combination of allusions, illusions, ambiguity and ambivalence infuses the text with an uncertainty that mirrors the self-questioning of the protagonist, and proves unsettling for the reader. However familiar with elements of the novel’s socio-historical basis and with Flaiano’s “literary nostalgia”, the overwhelming sense at its conclusion is that its substance somehow escapes our grasp; that, somehow, it is as elusive as the expiation the lieutenant seeks. What remains, therefore, is the power of the words themselves. It would be befitting, at this juncture, to quote the author himself, who said in a 1972 interview that:

Così come il fascismo ha permesso ai carcerati di rimanere sani perché, condannati ingiustamente, imparavano il senso della vita, così c’era una lingua diversa, un modo diverso di parlare agli uomini. Quindi, il silenzio e il gesto durano il tempo che ci si mette a realizzarli, dopodiché spariscono senza lasciare traccia; mentre la parola ferisce, la parola convince, la parola placa. Questo, per me, è il senso dello scrivere (as cited in Corti, 2001: 1216).

It is a sensation of an invisible space, of elements left unsaid and of feelings unarticulated, that prevails at the conclusion of the novel. It is this sensation which, more significantly, challenges a conventional critical approach, betraying many theoretical frameworks of academic enquiry. And it is this sensation that paradoxically renders the vision of *Tempo di uccidere* coherent in its incoherence. Simone Gambacorta below describes this distinctive, almost fleeting, style of Flaiano the author, the intangibility that reaches its zenith in the closing pages of *Tempo di uccidere*:

Alcuni scrittori non si riesce mai a prenderli del tutto. C'è sempre in loro qualcosa che scappa, che suggerisce un indizio ulteriore, qualcosa che allude a un'altra pista, a un'altra possibilità, a una possibilità altra. Flaiano è stato uno di questi, uno di quelli, cioè a volerli per forza stringerli alla mano, fanno come l'acqua, che scivola via e lascia il palmo vuoto [...] C'è sempre una chiosa bianca, impalpabile attorno alle sue parole, un nugolo di segni non scritti eppure autografi. È lì che sta il segreto, l'enigma, il punto di fuga di una prospettiva mobile e saettante (Gambacorta, 2010: 75).

In conclusion, it would be befitting simply to return at this juncture to one of the most revealing aphorisms in the novel: “i dubbi confortano, meglio tenerseli”.

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