Memory and representations of the colonial experience in Italian literature

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Abstract

For a long time, Italian colonialism has been considered different from other European colonialisms. The short life and the ephemeral character of the Italian East African Empire, as well as its immediate collapse after the defeat of the fascist forces in the Second World War, gave the Italian government an opportunity to quickly remove brutal aspects of the recent past from the shared memory of Italian citizens. This attitude spread an altered and mystifying image of the real Italian practices in the former colonies and caused a large ignorance of the colonial issue, as well as a general indifference supported by the mistaken trust in the disclosed motto "*Italiani brava gente"* (Italians good people).

Nevertheless, immediately after 1945 and through the 1950s, the memory of the recent colonial past took a variety of literary forms in authors who had directly experienced the failure of the colonialist ideals long praised by Mussolini's regime. My analysis of three Italian literary texts of this period, all settled in former national colonies, specifically Ennio Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere*, (*Time to kill*), Mario Tobino's *Il deserto della Libia* (*The desert of Libya*) and Giuseppe Berto's *Guerra in camicia nera* (*War in Black Shirt*), explores how the conflicting relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is represented. The autobiographical background shared by the three works are partially responsible for their approach to Italian colonialism, always oscillating between nostalgia and regret, self-absolution and condemnation. Having taken part in the Italian struggle for its *posto al sole* (place in the sun), and having witnessed its original naivety as well as its progressive cruelty, each of the authors re-enacts his past experience and gives voice to his own contradictory revision of it. Today, these literary works offer an insight into the Italian colonial past and help its necessary, but still partial and incomplete, critical review.

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For a long time, Italian colonialism has been considered different from other European colonialisms. If such a misconception could have been accepted and taken for granted over the years, it had its reasons. First, we need to acknowledge the relatively short-lived nature of the Italian empire in Africa, especially when refering to the last and most extensive form it assumed thanks to Mussolini's colonial efforts. The AOI, i.e. the *Africa Orientale Italiana* (Italian East Africa), established in 1936 at the end of a massive war against Ethiopia, was destroyed by the British military force during the Second World War less than a decade after it was established. Even at the height of its expansion, the Italian colonial empire covered only a small territory in comparison with those of other European countries. In addition to Ethiopia, the AOI included the former Italian Eritrea and the Italian Somaliland, a tiny enclave along the east coast of the Horn of Africa. The ASI, or *Africa Settentrionale Italiana* (Italian North Africa), covered only a thin coastal portion of Libya, the so-called *Quarta Sponda* (Fourth Shore). The fascist ideology explicitly wanted to consider it as an ideal extension of the Italian peninsula and as such segregated from the hinterland.

The lifespan and limited extension are two main factors circumscribing Italian colonialism. However, in addition to these factors we need to remind ourselves that Italy did not go through an actual process of decolonization, since Italy lost its colonies during the world war. This does not mean, however, that resistance struggles did not occur in the former Italian colonies. In fact, guerrilla warfare persisted both in Italian North Africa and in Italian East Africa, posing serious obstacles to the "pacification" of the empire violently pursued by the fascist forces. But since the fall of the colonial empire was ultimately determined by defeat in the global conflict, the strength and the impact of the indigenous opposition to colonial domination was easily − and maybe consciously − forgotten. No public debate emerged in Italy, as had happened in other European nations, as a way to deal with the thorny issue of the colonial experience as a whole. The lack of a serious engagement with colonialism inevitably resulted in a failure to develop a public memory of the colonial experience. As Jedlowski notes: 'If a certain aspect of the past is never publicly discussed, the amount of consideration given to it by each citizen is greatly reduced' (Jedlowski 2011: 34). In other words, the fact that Italian governments and politicians did not foster any kind of public commemoration, or even recognition of the controversial events, somehow authorized the entire Italian population to quickly forget them.

Undoubtedly, peculiar Italian historical and political conditions helped this fast removal, not to say "repression," of the recent past. In the aftermath of the second world war, the country faced other challenges that were generally considered more urgent to address. Still witnessing the ruins left by the war, both in terms of territorial devastation and the loss of human life, Italy had to get over twenty years of oppressive dictatorship. Nobody could have denied the compelling need for a practical and ethical reconstruction. Moreover, the close connection between fascism and colonialism, far from leading to a deep investigation of their specificity as two distinct phenomena, ended up making the process of historical explanation more difficult. As Karen Pinkus argues 'the colonialist enterprise was quickly demonized as a fascist enterprise' (2003: 300), and, as such, classified under the generic target of fascist violence. Colonialism was regarded as merely an aspect, and not even the worst, of a deplorable political oppression, even though, as Charles Burdett has pointed out 'Mussolini merely pursued, with greater determination and greater indifference to international opinion, a policy that had long antecedents' (Burdett 2001: 70). It is worth noting that, if the deep wound inflicted domestically by the fascist regime undoubtedly led to a profound and fulfilled need to understand the events in order to come to terms with them, there are no traces of a similar call to heal wounds related to the colonial phenomenon. Italian colonialism can hardly be described as a "traumatic" event. Especially if we refer to the notion of "cultural trauma" as articulated in the field of the sociology of memory, Jedlowski has defined in the following way: 'A cultural trauma can be identified when the members of a collectivity feel they have been involved in something horrible that has left an indelible mark on the consciousness of the group, marking their memories forever and irrevocably altering their future identity' (Jedlowski 2011: 35). As Jedlowski further explains, this process cannot happen "naturally", it must be engaged by the society as a whole.

The main consequence of this complex Italian situation is that the colonial experience was removed and repressed from the common memory through a process that was both unconscious and conscious. This process was informed by the political and historical characteristics mentioned above, that had a hand in determining modalities and the evolution of the rethinking of the past itself. At the same time, people directly implicated in colonialism were of course interested in concealing the most violent and exploitative details of it:

> At the basis of each culture we find the collective memory of the group bearing that culture. Now a memory is in itself necessarily a construction, in other words a selection from the facts of the past and their arrangement in a hierarchy that does not belong to them as their own, but comes to them from the present members of the group. This collective memory, like all human memory, carries out a radical selection from among the countless events of the past, and this is why forgetting is no less constitutive of identity than is the safeguarding of memories. The selection of facts and their arrangement in a hierarchy are not carried out by specialists […], but rather by influential groups within society who are trying to defend their interests. The aim of these groups is less the exact knowledge of the past and more the recognition by others of their place in the collective memory and thus in the social life of the country. (Todorov 2010: 60)

The influential groups Todorov mentions in the passage above were, in the Italian case, mostly willing to spread an altered and mystifying image of the real Italian practices, in order to protect and pursue their own interests. In this regard, other countries share with Italy a similar attitude towards their colonial past. As Jan Jansen has pointed out, 'despite great efforts to transmit the "colonial experience" to the metropole via cultural media and its impact on everyday life, for many Europeans colonialism remained an abstract concept' (Jansen 2010: 275). However, the author also suggests that 'since the 1990s, in countries such as France, Italy and Germany, it is possible to identify a "rediscovery" of colonial history in academic, public and sometimes even political discourse' (Jansen 2010: 275). If this "rediscovery" has occurred in the field of historical research, and included a new wave of attention in the political sphere as well, a comprehensive and critical reassessment of past events has to continue tirelessly at the broader level of the formation of public opinion. In this respect the Italian case is indeed paradigmatic and in some ways even extreme. Large-scale ignorance of the issue as well as a shared indifference towards it was partially limited by the mistaken trust in the motto *Italiani brava gente* (Italians are good people), that is the simple and comfortable belief that Italian colonialism was 'more tolerant and more humane than other colonialisms' (Palumbo 2003: 1). As Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller pointed out in a collection of articles on Italian colonialism, Italy did not earn commendable records in the field of military aggressions (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2005). The Ethiopian war (carried out by Mussolini heeding neither the blame nor the sanctions applied to Italy by the League of Nations) was the first large-scale conflict undertaken by a European country after the First World War. Moreover, Italy was the first country to use air raids (though still rudimentary) during the Italian-Turkish war for the

occupation of Libya, and it put into practice genocidal strategies by deporting populations and establishing concentration camps in the Libyan region of Cirenaica.

These and other important and reliable data have been uncovered thanks to the work of modern historians. However, more investigation is required with regard to cultural and literary representations that played a crucial role in the development of this peculiar form of oblivion.[2] In a collection of essays specifically devoted to investigate the question of colonial memory in Italy, Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan use the term "displacement", with the intent to 'examine the ways in which Italy held on to memories of colonial rule and ambition' (Andall and Duncan 2005: 21).

My intent in this article is to understand how and why the recent past came to be so easily distorted and dismissed. I will do so by examining three literary works published in the aftermath of the war (and of the loss of colonies as well), in order to prove how literary works that deal with the Italian colonial memory played a role in the process of forgetfulness and self-absolution, ultimately leading to the creation of a falsified, and misleading, public memory. All three different authors I will refer to (Giuseppe Berto, Mario Tobino and Ennio Flaiano) had directly experienced the failure of the colonialist and heroic ideals praised by Mussolini and shared by many Italians. In this respect, these works are autobiographical accounts, though each author takes on a different hue and is inevitably transfigured by a literary filter. Given the peculiar transposition of the events each writer engages with (more or less reliably and accurately) I believe that the three accounts are still relevant to us to the extent that they testify to the rapid development of a particular ideological vision of the recent past; a vision that was passed on, with few exceptions, to successive generations. As Charles Burdett reminds us, autobiographical memory is a profoundly selective tool:

> To remember is not to produce a perfect forgery of a past event, but to abstract and rearrange characteristics of that event. Not only does memory depend upon a coherent narrative of personal identity, it also constructs an historical context for the occurrences that it brings to mind. Alluding to the criteria that are unconsciously deployed for retention, recollection tells us about the mechanics both of past and of present perception […] the memory of the past is, to a large degree, moulded by the present circumstances of the

[2] In his article on the memories of Italy's past, Jedlowski talks about "oblivion entrepreneurs", referring to civilian and military officers who, as historians demonstrated, long hampered the public access to the archives. However, as my analysis of autobiographical and literary accounts demonstrates, several different factors working at different levels contributed to the formation and the persistence of an altered memory.

> person who remembers; upon the context in which memory is articulated and upon the demands that the present may make. (Burdett 2001: 16)

Memory, in other words, is a peculiar representation of the past that is created and constructed in the present. 'The past is always new; as life proceeds it changes, because parts of it that may have once seemed to have sunk into oblivion rise to the surface and other vanish without a trace because they have come to have such slight importance' (Svevo 1967: 302).

In the act of remembering any experienced event, one reconstructs a new reality based on the experience itself. 'The event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it' (Caruth 1995: 4). During this process, it is inevitable to partially distance oneself form the past, which is perceived as definitely concluded, thus becoming part of history. Hence memory is the result of a process influenced by many different aspects and factors that can easily alter the supposed truthfulness of the autobiographical account. The three works I will consider here were all issued around 1950, a time in which new political conditions − determined by the end of the war and of the dictatorship − came along. There was still an unclear situation, full of uncertainty and contradictions. Not surprisingly in these texts we find polemic and disenchanted notes, absolutely justified from the perspective of a newly acquired consciousness after the military defeat and the loss of the colonies. However, these feelings are still far from being unanimously shared, and the way in which they are expressed in these works reflects the difficult task of dealing with one's own recent past, which is at the same time a common, controversial and troublesome memory of an entire country.

Giuseppe Berto was a volunteer soldier of the Italian army fighting against the English force on the African frontline during the Second World War. In 1955, he decided to rework the diary he wrote between 1942 and 1943, with the intent to restore a violated truth. Though he explicitly puts an effort into writing 'honest pages', they are clearly permeated by nostalgia and a palpable need of expiation, oscillating between regret and self-absolution. None of these feelings, of course, might have been present at the time of the events narrated in the book. On the contrary, they need to be acknowledged and interpreted as developed in the aftermath of the war, and as such heavily influenced by its consequences and legacies.

Guerra in camicia nera (*A Blackshirts War*) starts with an apologetic aim, since the personal memory primarily addresses those who too easily condemned a dramatic event they did not take

part in. The drama mainly concerns the Italian military force on the edge of defeat. The writer almost ignores the specific context in which the war takes place. In Berto's view, his present condition, full of dangers and difficulties caused by the war, is antithetical to the colonial condition as such:

> Mi piacerebbe che non ci fosse la guerra. E vivere in questa fresca cittadina dell'altopiano cirenaico, lasciandomi prendere un po' alla volta da quel senso di irresponsabilità che costituisce il fascino della vita nei presidi coloniali. (Berto 1955: 15). (I would like it if there was no war. And I could live in this fresh small town of the Cirenaico upland, and it would let me gradually enjoy that sense of irresponsibility that is the real charm of the colonial districts).

But what does this charm consist in? The only "colonial" element Berto seems to take into consideration is the African landscape, which is represented positively and appreciated. It is cast as having a positive effect on the European subject gazing at it. Furthermore, it is de-contextualized, made almost unrecognizable but for some scattered ingredients, chosen as easy stereotypes. An oasis, a marabout's grave and the Arabs' voices from far away are juxtaposed, without any deeper characterization, to sounds of barking dogs, braying donkeys and screeching pulleys. Deprived of any originality, the landscape is converted into a European perspective, "orientalized" to the extent that it simply becomes a postcard image, as if it was created exclusively for European consumption. This appropriation of the foreign land is even easier where landscape has already been modified by colonial intervention. While admiring vines and olive trees Berto feels he is 'approaching Italy', and he immediately recalls the 'most beautiful parts of Calabria and Sicily'.

The author never expresses any doubt about the benefits produced by the Italian domination over the African territories. He cannot understand how indigenous people might consider both Italians and English people as 'foreigners, and so enemies'. Not merely because he cannot imagine Africans could ever free themselves from foreign domination, but also because in his view they should have taken advantage of the presence of Italian civilization. What is clearly missing from his account is the indigenous man. His point of view is never considered. The reader almost completely forgets about his presence during the entire account.

When the reality of the defeat is already tangible, and even Mussolini's propagandistic words seem not to be trusted anymore, Berto tries to free the military forces (including himself) of any

responsibility. Moreover, he never openly blames the fascist behavior and ends his account with a short note written when, after a detention period in a US prison, he is finally able to go home:

> Poi, col tempo, dimenticammo il senso di vergogna. Dovemmo fare un lungo cammino, prima di poter tornare a casa. E mentre il tempo passava, nell'eco delle cose che succedevano nel mondo, noi perdemmo la vergogna di aver perduto. Ci parve anzi di aver fatto abbastanza per non perdere. (Berto 1955: 218). (Then, as time went by, we forgot the shame. We had to go long way, before we could finally go back home. And, as time passed by, in the echo of things that were happening in the world, we lost the shame of having lost. It seemed to us instead that we had done enough not to lose).

After a few years, when he was reworking the diary to publish it, there is neither guilt nor shame. 'Shame is not great reparation, but it signifies that one has made the other person's point of view one's own' (Jedlowski 2011: 39). As time passed by, perpetrated horrors of the war vanish from the mind, while what is left is just the regret of a "glorious" destiny that was hoped for but failed to materialize. Finally, the profound feeling of nostalgia for a youth full of ideals destined to collapse is already a sign of a misleading reconstruction of the recent past. As Alloula suggests, unashamed nostalgia, dangerous in its persistence, can easily support forgetfulness of the reasons behind and the consequences of past events:

> Today, the nostalgic wonderment and tearful archeology (Oh! those colonial days!) are very much in vogue. But to give in to them is very much to forget a little too quickly the motivations and the effects of this vast operation of systematic distortion. It is also to lay the groundwork for its return in a new guise: a racism and a xenophobia titillated by the nostalgia of the colonial empire. (Alloula 1986: 4)

Even though a similar feeling of nostalgia is perceptible in Tobino's *Il deserto della Libia* (*The Desert of Libya*), this sentiment is countered by a strong resentment, a sort of anger that becomes prevalent during the story, clearly expressed through the consistent use of a sarcastic tone. The historical context is exactly the same as in Berto's, and the story is similarly based on the author's personal experience on the Libyan frontline during the Second World War. However, Tobino's antifascist political opinion creates an ambivalent position towards the enterprise he is taking part

in. From the beginning, the author sees his trip to Africa as 'un misto di piacere e di condanna' (Tobino 1952: 15) (a mix of pleasure and condemnation), and he discloses his present awareness of the futility and transience of his juvenile illusions. Unlike Berto, Tobino is not reworking a previous diary, nor does he always speak in the first person in his account. *Il deserto della Libia*, reflects a retrospective attempt to recall scattered memories from his experience and to make new sense of them.

One looks in vain here for an unqualified celebration of Italian (and specifically fascist) improvements of the colonised African territory that can be identified in Berto's narrative. The main feature of Tobino's landscape is, as suggested by the title, a bleakness capable of enveloping land and people. Unlike Berto, Tobino apparently tries to involve human characters in his story, not only Italians but also Arabs, whose points of view, however, are inevitably filtered and mediated by the author's. Closer inspection reveals that the most central character of the book is Mahmud, who 'in the oasis was the only one open to what could come from Europe and from the world' (Tobino 1952: 24). In other words, Mahmud is admired because, in Tobino's opinion, he gave up an impossible opposition to foreign domination, and tried to get the best out of his subaltern condition. It is in any case significant that Tobino makes a special effort to try to interpret the way in which the colonized relates to the colonizer. For example in his portrait of Mahmud's father, who he describes as 'somebody who has always lived under the foreigner and has always managed to treat him as a peer', but where Tobino glimpses 'a bitterness now calm, but still present' (Tobino 1952: 28).

While Libyans are depicted as determined and dignified, though submissive, Tobino mostly shows an ironic and irreverent attitude towards his compatriots, alternately described as ridiculous when boastful, pathetic when deluded, paradoxically wise insofar as they are maddened by their alienated condition. However, among the Italians there is a positive character: lieutenant Marcello who, having experienced fascist domination in his country, is now forced, against his will, to wield a similarly hideous power over other people. Yet both Mahmud and Marcello are destined to be enemies given the historical and political circumstances. Non-communication between their two worlds must be ascribed to a history that transcends individual actors, who cannot be considered accountable. Tobino seems to be able to direct harsh blame only towards the fascist regime, and through this illustrates the danger of exclusively associating fascism with colonialism. In this way, he opens up the possibility of associating the generic figure of the Italian victim of fascism with the entire indigenous population, oppressed by both fascism and colonialism.

Thus, the pervasive use of an ironic tone and the concealment of the author himself behind the mask of a fictional character do not succeed in restoring the sought for truth. On the contrary, *Il deserto della Libia*, by portraying Italians more as victims than as perpetrators of any crime, ultimately helps strengthen the persistent myth of *Italiani brava gente*.

Flaiano's work is undoubtedly more complex. It is a novel, but it is closely related to the author's autobiographical experience as a soldier fighting in the Ethiopian war. The main character is more than just an alter ego of the writer: he is emblematic of a whole generation of Italians, sent to the African desert to fight an incomprehensible war in a foreign and unknown country. I briefly summarize the plot to make the analytical points relevant to my approach clearer: during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the soldier-protagonist, having obtained a license to cure his toothache, has a relationship with a native woman, but accidentally kills her. Convinced he has been infected with leprosy, he flees across the desert, haunted by the fear of being discovered. The flight leads him to commit other crimes. At the end, when he finally wants to turn himself in, he discovers nobody has informed on him, and he will not be punished for his deeds.

For a long time the allegorical meaning of *Tempo di uccidere* (*Time to Kill*) has prevailed over the realistic and specific context in which the story is set. Many critics[3] have highlighted the deep existential implications included in the personal and metaphysical journey of the protagonist, who moves from guilt to self-absolution, passing through a number of unlikely, even absurd episodes. However, it is reductive to consider, as Patrizia Palumbo has done, Ethiopia 'as a mere backdrop to what is Flaiano's existentialist representation of human conditions' (Palumbo 2002: 58), in order to include the novel in the existentialist trend of the contemporary European novel (Albert Camus, Joseph Conrad)[4]. First, the colonialist attitude of the soldier is far more evident than Tobino's soldier figure, Marcello. Flaiano's protagonist seems to remain attracted to the pristine pureness of an uncontaminated land, so different from the land he is accustomed to. But what really gratifies him is the consciousness of the supremacy of man over nature:

[3] Sergio Pautasso has stated categorically that the protagonist's troubles in the novel are the same trouble every man has to deal with, regardless of the conditions and the historical circumstances in which he happens to be (Pautasso 1976).

[4] See also Fioretti (2009).

> Qui sei un uomo, ti accorgi cosa significa essere 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. Tutto è chiaro, e non hai altri spettatori che te stesso. La vanità ne esce lusingata. (Flaiano 2010: 53) (Here you are a man, and you understand what it means to be a man, an heir of the victor over the dinosaurs. You think, move, kill, eat the animal you found alive just one hour before, you give a brief sign and you are obeyed. You proceed defenseless and nature fears you. Everything is clear, and you have no other viewers than yourself. Vanity comes out flattered).

The passage illustrates the pride of the white man, of the European who has been educated in the cult of power, violence and social Darwinism. In this way, the indigenous world, which was not even present in Berto and relegated to a few representative figures in Tobino, emerges in Flaiano as the fundamental and unavoidable counterpart of the protagonist's white world. Flaiano recounts the encounter, that was a historical reality and therefore impossible to conceal, as the clash between two different cultures forced to coexist in close proximity.

The encounter between the protagonist and the young indigenous woman determines the unfolding story. The female presence is central here (the presence of a female indigenous character could be seen as an "improvement" from the two novels just analyzed, where the human presence was either ignored (Berto), or identified with a few male characters (Tobino)). However, it is a de-humanized presence, that is needed by the author to express the intimate bond between exotic attraction and erotic passion which characterizes the European approach to the other. In similar fashion to the African continent, with which she is explicitly identified, Mariam attracts the man and repels him at the same time. And she is described in a peculiar way, where faunal and floral words are used as explicit terms of comparison. Her smile is 'that of a nice pet who is waiting for its master'; her smell is 'the vegetable smell of a patient tree' and her eyes offer 'the unbearable glance of a suspicious animal' (Flaiano 2010: 95, 97). The dehumanising of the woman,enables the soldier to reduce his own guilt for the crime he just committed.

However, there is a male character, Johannes, an old man, who appears to operate as a sort of voice of conscience. He is able, without almost uttering a word, of constantly reminding the protagonist about his crime. It is not clear throughout the story what kind of relationship Johannes and Mariam have, though the reader inevitably shares with the protagonist the suspicion that he might be her father. Johannes never gives up his dignity, even though he is forced to witness, the destruction of

his own country at the hand of a foreign and violent domination, as is Mahmud in Tobino's novel. But in contrast to Mahmud, Johannes tries to avoid any close contact with the whites. He avoids asking them any kind of help, and refuses any favor the soldier offers him, as he seems to realize he can never trust his words. In this case, verbal communication between the two men is impossible as a consequence of the colonial domination. Demonstrating his awareness of the inequality that the colonizer would like to hypocritically ignore, Johannes knows that, in a relationship in which he must not forget his subjugated position, he cannot accept any kind of friendship either.

Flaiano, clearly takes a critical stand on the supposed "civilization" brought to Africa by Europeans: in a fragment of *Aethiopia*, a very brief diary he wrote while he was there, he defines civilization as just an opinion, adding that it would take at least forty more years to corrupt indigenous people. Sometimes, even the atmosphere of decay and degeneration that in *Time to Kill* surrounds people and land seems attributable to European imperialism, which is explicitly compared to the leprosy, so contagious and "curable" only by death. Yet is this enough to maintain, as a large part of his critics did, that Flaiano had throughout this novel manifested an anti-colonialist attitude? Or can we really do a reading of the novel in which there is an interior evolution of the protagonist, who progressively acquires a deeper awareness of good and evil and becomes a new man? Two major factors prevents the author from openly adopting and expressing a clear anti-colonialist view in my reading. First, if we consider again the close connection between fascism and colonialism, we must note as well that Flaiano never stood against the regime, assuming a disengaged political position. Furthermore, several nostalgic hints scattered through the story reveal an attitude similar to Berto and Tobino. After being disillusioned by the events directly experienced, they all want to evoke moments of youthful expectations, in which the war context inspired heroic feelings. Flaiano, like Berto and Tobino, ends up attempting to free Italian soldiers from blame, highlighting their honest intentions, their loyal bond to each other, their courage and dignity in facing an unwanted war. Again, *Time to Kill* eventually contributes to spread a public colonial memory of Italians as unconscious actors of a story written for them: they simply did not have the strength, the power, or the will to change or react against what they were somehow forced to perform. This undermines the critical potential of the story. The protagonist will go home without paying for his sins, because apparently nobody has started an investigation into them. What is left is just 'la scia di quel fetore' ('the wake of that stench') which annoys but does not hurt. Just a few years after the inglorious end of the colonialist enterprise, the foreshadowing of its fast removal is already tangible.

Conclusion

As I have argued in this article the long-lasting impact of literary works on public opinion cannot be underestimated, in so far as they decisively contribute to shape the public memory of groups living within the same society. If, quoting again from Jedlowski, public memory is 'the site of processes of constructing the past which defines the criteria of *plausibility* and *importance* using which … certain elements are selected and re-offered to the society as a whole' (Jedlowski 2011: 34), this very public memory must be analyzed in all the components that create and nourish it. Colonial memory is undoubtedly present even in Italy, at least in the sense that autobiographical and literary accounts, contemporary or immediately after the events, exist and are available to contemporary scholars. However, the scholar's duty in this field requires multiple steps. First of all, s/he needs to recollect and give new visibility to these works, thus acknowledging that colonialism did have an impact and left a wound on the collective body of the nation. Also, while interpreting these works, the scholar must detect the intentions behind them, and deconstruct the ways in which these intentions might have influenced the work of the memory in the very act of writing. When dealing with Italian colonialism, whose memory has passed through partial removal and a faulty transmission, it is necessary to pay attention to the mechanisms that, in the moment of writing, gave shape to the memory of the past. Only in this way would it eventually be possible to achieve a different memory of the same past. Once again, literary works can play a decisive role in the restoration of a new old memory. As Gabriele Proglio recently pointed out, Gabriella Ghermandi's rewriting, in her postcolonial novel *Queen of Flowers and Pearls*, of the key scene of Flaiano's novel, offers to the reader the chance to reconsider the Italian conquest of Ethiopia and the important role played by African resistance. If, in Ghermandi's story, the indigenous woman reacts against the violence the soldier tries to inflict on her and finally kills him, it means that an 'alternative path of memory is still possible' (Proglio 2011: 10, my translation).

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