

"A true, real and sincere documentation". Concocting the Colonial Novel in Fascist Italy

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Introduction: Italian Colonialism, Fascism and Literature

In the second half of the 1920s, the fascist regime progressively extended and consolidated its grip on all aspects of Italian society and culture through a wide range of policies and institutions. This consolidation of power over Italian society was accompanied by a vast discursive and rhetorical apparatus hinging on the central trope of a national regeneration, to be realised by fascist policies of vigorous rejuvenation and all-encompassing modernisation, combined with a commitment to elements that were considered as the core values of Italy's national identity. Through this combination of tradition and modernity, so the narrative went, fascism's cult of national regeneration not only addressed the unfulfilled promises of the *Risorgimento* but also, and more broadly, would effectively remedy the deep ills of modern society, which the liberal-democratic and bourgeois-capitalist order had been unable to solve (Gentile, *Sacralisation*; Gentile, "Myth"; Ben Ghiat 1-4). Fascism's colonial discourse was seamlessly fitted into this broader discourse of national regeneration (Ben Ghiat 3-4; Labanca 129-151), for fascism would also — after the turbulent decade from the Italian conquest of Libya (1911-1912) up to Mussolini's rise to power (1922) — implement a vigorous politics of consolidation of Italy's control over its colonial territories and (whenever possible) expand its boundaries. By the early 1920s, Italy's colonies comprised Eritrea and Italian Somaliland, Libya and the Dodecanese Islands. In line with the Fascist Party's broad discourse on the need to boost the Italian colonial project, from the mid-1920s onwards various periodicals hosted critical pieces, inquiries and discussions on colonial literature. Journals such as *Esotica* [*Exotic*], *Oltremare* [*Overseas*] or *L'Azione coloniale* [*Colonial Action*], which focused specifically on colonial topics, along with general periodicals, regularly featured articles on Italy's colonial literature. These pieces not only examined literature's connection to the regime's colonial policies but also scrutinised the place of colonial literature within Italy's literary culture, as well as the functions it could and should (or should not, or failed to) fulfill and the audiences it served (or failed to serve). Particularly interesting in this respect was the position of the novel within Italian colonial literature, a position that for many critics and authors was up for debate, as will be shown in this article (Casales 2-16).

These various discussions on colonial literature often tacitly subsumed ideas and assumptions about the genre of the novel and its broader social and political significance. On the one hand, these assumptions on the genre of the novel clearly tied in with broader literary tendencies in 1920s and 1930s Italy, but on the other hand the debate on the colonial novel was also informed by political and ideological issues and demands, as well as by ideas on the specific functions the novel might fulfill within the broader knowledge culture associated with colonialism (Mulsow 162-163). In fact, the hypothesis of this contribution is that discussions and opinions on the colonial novel (i.e. novels addressing in explicit terms various aspects of Italy's colonial endeavours) can only be fully understood if one takes into account not only the ideological context but also the knowledge culture with which colonial literature is inextricably intertwined.

In the various contributions, statements and opinions voiced by authors, critics, politicians or journalists, three clusters of factors seem to be crucial for a broader understanding of the discussion on colonial literature (and on the novel in particular) within the broader colonial knowledge culture. First, this contribution will highlight the specific arguments in defense and illustration of the role of the novel vis à vis other genres of colonial literature, with a focus on references to the colonial knowledge culture. A second important cluster of factors concerns the relationship between the colonial novel and what can be termed in a general sense as a pedagogy of the nation, as discussions on the novel often involved references to the development of a national consciousness or awareness. Finally, and by way of conclusion, the various positions on the colonial novel can actually be seen as a kind of compressed timeline of Italian literature's intricate ties with Italian national identity and its knowledge culture from the *Risorgimento* onwards.

Italian Colonial Literature and the Novel

Various critical comments on the situation of Italian colonial literature pointed out that the novel as a genre clearly lagged behind a number of other literary genres and text types addressing Italy's colonial endeavours, not just in purely quantitative terms but also, and more importantly, when it came to quality, variety of form and content, as well as impact on the audience: in particular travel literature is often singled out as being especially impactful. Interestingly, the impact of poetry or theatre – let alone popular media like comics and cinema – are hardly mentioned in these discussions, although highly influential poets like Gabriele D'Annunzio commented on Italy's colonial endeavours in their work. Several critics and authors were particularly vocal in praising the prolific production of non-fiction, such as travel accounts, and acknowledged its political, epistemic and pedagogical role. In fact, these texts described, oriented and further enhanced the evolution of Italian colonialism. In particular, travel accounts of explorers, pioneers, military and other officials came into the picture because of the way they combined objective observation and subjective experience, knowledge transfer and narrative tension. Precisely the balanced blend of these elements had made travel writing quite effective in disseminating information on the colonies and in enthusing the public for the colonial project. Yet, at the same time, as impactful as the vast production of travel writing and non-fictional accounts had been, texts belonging to these genres not always qualified as genuinely artistic literature and were seen as unable to fulfill the specific literary and cultural functions associated with the novel. This was a point raised by several critical interventions published from the mid-1920s onwards. The first issue of *L'Oltremare* hosted an "Appello", signed *L'Oltremare* (and almost certainly written by the editor in chief Roberto Cantalupo, who from 1924 till 1926 had been undersecretary of State of the colonies), which stated somewhat provokingly that Italy undoubtedly boasted quite some colonial writers, but that they did not write novels ("Appello" 8),¹ in part because the current generation of "africanist writers" ("scrittori africanisti") tended to excel in "laziness" ("pigrizia"). These writers, so the "Appello" continued, should get their act together, and start doing what they had to do because Italy was currently lacking a truly artistic colonial literature, and a colonial politics without literature would always be incomplete ("*una politica coloniale senza letteratura sarà sempre incompleta*", "Appello" 8 – emphasis in the original). Similar views were expressed in the same issue of *L'Oltremare* by the critic Benso Becca, who stressed the need for an adequate and sufficiently modern literary expression of the multivaried reality of colonial life, which comprehended "history, political economy, warfare, customs, science and poetry; it is an expressive

world full of human novelty, offered to the will and imagination of man" (Becca 33);² Italy surely had produced a high number of non-fiction texts on these and many other topics, but what was needed was a writer capable of translating all these aspects into a work that offered a historical overview, synthesised the scientific value and illustrated the formal clarity of the colonial project – the implication being that in the current state of Italy's colonial enterprise, only a true novelist would be up to the task of providing such a synthesis.

The "Appello" and Becca's article are good illustrations of the general tenor of many other critical interventions on colonial literature, which expressed similar reservations on the current state of Italian colonial literature. For a start, the positive appreciation of the qualities and functions of colonial travel literature applied especially to texts that managed to successfully combine authentic personal experience and documentary, essay and adventure, as was the case in many accounts by pioneer settlers, explorers, scientists or officials who had adventured into uncharted territory. Criticism was not spared vis à vis the large amount of travel accounts sprouting from short stays, round trips, chance visits and encounters in the colonies, and in which subjective and impressionistic literary imagery and phrasing often prevailed over authentic experience, truthful observation, and reliable in-depth knowledge about colonial reality. Such a blatant lack of expertise could only produce literary clichés of the worst kind and threatened to further fuel misconceptions and misgivings about the colonies. Critical remarks of this sort were voiced by various authors in their responses to the "Referendum on colonial literature" held by the periodical *L'Azione coloniale* in 1931 ("Referendum").³ It is not hard to see how this criticism of a predominantly subjective and highly literary gaze on the colonies tied in with the widespread criticism targeting the isolationist attitudes of *letterati* who preferred to retreat to the gilded belletrist mazes of the so-called *prosa d'arte* rather than to use their art as a means to engage with reality (and engaging with reality would then mean, in particular in the context of colonialism, to put their artistic talent at the service of the nation's colonial project). In the debate about colonial literature, this criticism resonated even more sharply, precisely because *prosa d'arte* about the colonies demonstrated all the more evidently to what extent this kind of art was blatantly disconnected from reality.

In the same context, pleas in favour of a new colonial novel (or criticism of the manifest absence of the right kind of novel) regularly made the case that travel writing and other genres of non-fiction literature, while useful and even necessary as a medium of information and knowledge communication, might no longer be the literary means of expression best suited for the stage in which Italian colonialism was about to enter in the second half of the 1920s – at least according to the official communication of the regime. Press reports and accounts of all sorts constantly stressed that the fascist regime was not only gaining a firmer military and political grip on the Italian colonies (notably through the ruthless and murderous campaigns in Libya), but also that it had at its disposal a substantial body of scientific and technological knowledge about the colonies – a colonial library that laid the foundations for all sorts of operations and interventions in the non-Western reality (Mudimbe). The fascist regime would continue to expand this library through a number of institutional initiatives and used it to inform its economic, logistical and institutional policies. As Italy's colonial empire in the making was entering a phase of consolidation, it should also have a more mature colonial literature, able to offer a fully-fledged literary elaboration of the colonial experience in all its breadth, complexity and bearing. And the novel, so it was assumed by several critics, was the most suitable genre to evoke and combine all the components of the colonial project in a richly varied storyworld that conveys an integrated and strongly

appealing vision. In a novel, knowledge on nature and culture, concrete evocation of living conditions, as well as a diverse range of human experiences, emotions and endeavours could be forged into a convincingly realistic and potentially impactful narrative synthesis. The novel was the ideal literary medium to overcome what William Everdell has termed the "ontological discontinuity" (qtd. in Boyd Rayward 8) caused by the explosive development of knowledge that characterised modern societies, because of its ability to bring back together objects, experiences and spheres of life that have been transformed into discrete and discontinuous entities by the apparatus of modern knowledge systems.

Similar views on the novel tie in with discussions in Italian literary magazines from the late 1920s onwards, which became intertwined with (often rather generically formulated) pleas for a "new realism" (Van den Bergh 13-19). The authors and critics advocating such a breakthrough saw the novel as the primary means to realise a literature that committed to a concrete and incisive representation of the social fabric of the nation, as opposed to the sterile self-centredness of the *prosa d'arte* that cut itself off from society. This debate is often referred to as the debate between "contentutisti" or "letterati-ideologi" – writers and critics advocating the primacy of content matter in literature – and "calligrafi" or "letterati-letterati", who emphasise the primacy of aesthetic criteria (Hallamore Caesar and Caesar 166-167). Most of the advocates for a committed realist fiction belonged to the youngest generation of writers, and although some of them were very loyal to the regime and explicitly link their poetics to a corporativist vision of literary authorship, all these pleas for a new literary realism could not simply be equated with regime-minded literature nor are such realist novels mere *romans à these* (Ben Ghiat; Van den Bergh 35-41). However, a central role in the debates on realism and belletrist writing was played by a view of the novel as a genre capable of combining a truthful evocation of present-day society (including its most prosaically material, scientific, technological, urbanistic features) with concrete human experience. As it was argued, the novel is a genre that was able to offer readers a full-fledged and coherent insight in the complexities of modern reality through its narrative dynamics. Although the political dimension of this poetics (as well as its potential for propaganda) is obvious, a number of novels or critical interventions associated with new forms of literary realism are somewhat more ambiguous and not necessarily in line with pro-fascist views. Critics closer to the regime may have called on novelists to offer spiritual and moral guidance to readers, by showing them how individual destinies could be embedded in a broader national narrative. Nevertheless, some of the novels associated with realism in the 1930s emphasised the alienation and confusion of modern society rather than the connection to a coherent collective narrative (Carlo Bernari's *Tre operai* [*Three workers*] and Alberto Moravia's *Gli indifferenti* [*The Indifferent*] are some of the most obvious examples).

Reflections on colonial literature in the late 1920s showed strong affinities with discussions on realism in Italy in general. In fact, the debate on colonial literature predated some of the arguments around realism in the early 1930s and used more precise and incisive arguments. This has to do with factors that are rather specific for the colonial novel, and which include (a) its relation with colonial novels of the previous years and decades, and (b) its relation to the vast body of specialised knowledge on the colonies circulating in books and periodicals.

Pleas in favour of a genuine and authentic colonial novel often adopted a highly critical stance towards the aestheticising fascination for the exotic that was considered far too dominant in colonial literature, and especially in fiction, both in Italy and abroad. This orientalist view, often associated with plotlines of European protagonists

travelling through the colonies and falling under the spell of exotic scenery, customs and (most of all) women, was systematically dismissed as an aestheticising falsification at the service of a bourgeois audience in search of escapist entertainment. Italy needed a different type of colonial novel, one that — while still telling compelling stories to the public — should be firmly rooted in concrete experience and terrain knowledge and avoid at all times the pitfalls of exoticism. Criticism of exotic stereotypes can be found time and again in comments in colonial periodicals of the late 1920s and early 1930s. In 1929 Mario Pozzi stated, at the end of an article in *L'Oltremare* on "Art and Propaganda in Colonial Literature", that Italian colonial literature was unable "to free itself from that false romanticism that describes unreal worlds and draws nonexistent horizons" (Pozzi 212).⁴ Two months later in the same periodical Osvaldo Guida strongly criticised the many writings full of "stereotypical impressions of exotic nomadism, arbitrary descriptions of epic combat, brushstrokes of conspicuous colonial colour, incurably peppered with the usual eternal clichés" (Guida 358),⁵ which, he argued, did more harm than good to Italian colonialism. Several months later, again in *L'Oltremare*, Orazio Pedrazzi targeted the "childish lyricism" ("lirismo infantile") that had infested much of Italy's colonial literature and that had disseminated "an overblown, oratorical, false Mediterranean" ("un mediterraneo ampolloso, oratorico, bugiardo") (Pedrazzi 543), a kind of literature that had become hopelessly outdated under fascist rule.

In the referendum on colonial literature set up by the periodical *L'Azione coloniale* in 1931, many authors agreed on the overly stereotypical and sentimental imagery that pervaded many colonial novels (contrasting these novels to travel literature, especially that of the pioneering generation of Italian colonialism, which was characterised by reliable observations, concrete knowledge and authentic experience). Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, for example, urged colonial literature to rid itself of "sentimental and romantic frills" ("fronzoli sentimentali e romantici") and to insert technical and practical elements (Marinetti in "Referendum", part I); Marinetti was himself an example of a "Taylorized aesthetics" hailing the beauty and vigorous energy of precision, transparency and functionality (Boyd Wayward 5). Writer Maria Luisa Fiumi attacked fellow authors who wrote on the colonies after only a short visit and who, lacking any in-depth knowledge and genuine experience of colonial life, managed to publish only "pieces in colours of poor taste, boring prolixity, and picture postcards" ("pezzi di colore di cattivo gusto, prolissità noiose e cartoline illustrate") (Maria Luisa Fiumi in "Referendum", part II). Clarice Tartufari recommended her colleagues to "shun exaggerated partiality, mortify emphasis, renounce big words, which make the cheeks swell with empty ideas, and prevent the conveying of emotion" (Tartufari in "Referendum", part III)⁶ and Giovan Battista Angioletti (to quote one last example) denounced the "false and strident romantic and tearful lyricism" ("falso e stridente lirismo romantico e lacrimogeno") of many colonial novels, which contained "too much literature and little life" ("troppa letteratura e poca vita") (Angioletti in "Referendum", part V).

Interestingly, the narrative and representational strategies of several novels published in the early 1920s already went in the direction indicated by the critical remarks formulated by Pozzi, Marinetti and Fiumi in their answers to the 1931 Referendum. In these novels, Italian colonial reality was no longer experienced from the perspective of an Italian visitor, settler or official, but from that of native protagonists. The novels also contained a wealth of references to local culture, religion, realia, landscapes, settings and language which were evoked through the lived experience of the protagonists; to put it in Michel Pierssens's terms, native characters

here become the main "epistemic figures" used to articulate the knowledge conveyed by the text and to guarantee the mediation between the text and the reader (Pierssens 11-12). In 1922, *L'illustrazione italiana* [*The Italian Illustrated*] published in installments Luciano Zuccoli's *Kif Tebbi* [*As you wish*], an "African novel" with a plot entirely set in a native Libyan environment at the time of the Italo-Turkish war. The novel appeared in a slightly revised version in book form in 1923, with a prefatory letter addressed to Luigi Federzoni (then acting as minister of colonies) in which Zuccoli explained that his choice for an exclusively native setting and plotline amounted to a straightforward refusal of the ways in which literary representations of non-European realities were constantly overshadowed by the intrusive subjective experience of the European gaze. His novel, so the author stated, proposed a "direct and objective representation" of the native world, without the intrusive presence of a European I-figure and the psychological distortions this entails.

Because, I repeat, the colonial novel must be understood as the direct and objective representation of colonial characters and events without intervention of extraneous psychologies, which would act as a corrective element or touchstone. It is in the reader and his soul that we must look for the touchstone; he, the reader, will be the judge of exotic customs and types. The author's ego must not distract the audience from the contemplation of a world, which interests them precisely because it is not their own and far from them. (Zuccoli xii-xiii)⁷

In 1922, Arnaldo Cipolla published *Un'imperatrice d'Etiopia* [*An Empress of Ethiopia*], a novel containing only native protagonists, settings and detailed information). As pointed out, from the second half of the 1920s onwards, when pleas for a colonial literature free from exotic clichés and based on an in-depth knowledge and authentic experience became dominant, novelists tended to immerse the storylines in local settings that were depicted often with abundant detail. Several novels and short stories had exclusively native protagonists and settings (the first issues of *Esotica*, published in the fall of 1926, for instance, contained several short stories and Mario Dei Gaslini's novel *Le ombre dell'harem* [*The Shadows of the Harem*] all dominated by native characters). In reality, many novels from the late 1920s and early 1930s still hinged on the traditional plotline of an Italian man (often a soldier or an official) engaging in a romantic relation with a native woman, and some authors seemed wanting to avoid a too overtly exoticist imagery (Pagliara 13-14). But although the Italian protagonist might still be quite fascinated by a native female character, he no longer fell prey to her bewitching charms and retained his ability to act autonomously and vigorously, staying on the course he chose to follow. In Gino Mitrano Sani's *La reclusa di Giarabub* [*The Prisoner of Jaghbub*] (1931), the native female character exhibits striking agency and chooses the side of European civilisation over the local culture to which her father and brother want to remain loyal. In another of Mitrano Sani's novels, *Femina somala* [*Somali Female*] (1932), the native female character Macaja, in spite of being a somewhat mysterious figure initiated in traditional beliefs and magical spells, is presented in a sober and almost anthropological tone (on this novel, see Tomasello 171; Casales 142-144).

As mentioned, most of these novels stand out for the detailed evocation of local settings, cultural practices, social relations, languages and customs. Interestingly, many of the anthropological, geographical, linguistic and socioeconomic elements are presented to the reader without much additional explanation: it seems as though the

author's intent is to immerse the readers in the native reality of the colonies, and to encourage (or potentially force) them to adopt what could be called proto-anthropological reading strategies. Incorporating knowledge in the plotline and setting is indeed a way to have readers actively engage with the text and to try to make sense of the abundant information on native settings and cultures. It is a type of colonial novel that has strong interdiscursive connections with the wealth of knowledge on the colonies that was made available to the public through a broad range of text types and publishing venues (periodicals, book series, publishers). Readers of this kind of colonial literature were apparently expected to cross-read and cross-reference the novel together with many of the other sources of knowledge of the ever-expanding colonial library.

So, a considerable number of novelists seemed to opt for a more straightforward depiction of the colonies, trying to avoid the traditional exotic imagery of many other novels set in the colonies, yet this does not mean that these novels offer a genuinely realistic (let alone an impartial or critic) depiction of the colonies. In fact, the reasons why exoticist fiction was condemned had everything to do with the portrayal of the white protagonist succumbing to an unhealthy fascination with the colonised other and failing to truly exercise his dominant role as a representative of European civilisation. The *mal d'Africa* or African disease was the symptom of a weak will, an ill-understood national identity, a manifest lack of clear direction in life. In contrast, novels fully immersing the reader in native settings advocated a different attitude toward the colonised (or to-be-colonised) Other. It is quite obvious that the proto-anthropological reading strategies that they seemed to encourage in their readers were not inspired by any humanitarian respect for other cultures. The sort of immersive colonial novels that have just been discussed articulated a logic of colonial domination through clear interdiscursive connections with the objectifying and distancing strategies of colonial knowledge production, and therefore were no exception to the fact that colonial novels invariably adopted "the univocal perspective of the dominators", to put it in Francesco Casales' terms (Casales 4, 25). Arnaldo Cipolla's response to the "Referendum" on colonial literature in *L'Azione coloniale* is quite telling in this respect. The main features of Italian colonial literature, he stated, are:

the sincerity, the feeling of profound sympathy for the so-called inferior peoples, their complete complacency, the passionate regret that we Italians have arrived late in the colonial arena, while we have all the qualities of perfect colonisers, a feeling far more penetrating than that of the French and English, the unalterable will that translates into the certainty of one day succeeding in correcting the colonial ingenuities of the present African and Asian situation, and finally the intention, demonstrated by the treatment of every colonial topic and in every colonial territory, to expand. (Cipolla, in "Referendum", part I)⁸

While Cipolla claimed that the objective and detailed representation of colonial realities might be informed by a sympathetic and sincere attitude towards the colonised, it ultimately (and unsurprisingly) turns out to be a kind of realism fully informed by colonial knowledge culture and in support of colonial policies. This is also illustrated by several of Gino Mitrano Sani's novels, from *E per i solchi millennari delle carovane* [*Over the thousand-year tracks of the caravans*] (1926) to *La reclusa di Giarabub* (1931). In these works, male Italian protagonists — despite falling in love with native women — maintain their position of resolute superiority. Instead of succumbing to the exotic charms of these women, they bring them closer to European civilisation. In his

(preface to *La reclusa di Giarabub*, Marinetti explicitly criticised the position of inferiority that white European protagonists occupied in novels dominated by an orientalist gaze and plotline, and in contrast praised Mitrano Sani's male protagonists for their typically futurist resolve and action.

It should be noted, though, that more than a few of these novels — in particular those set in North Africa — did show a genuine interest in and in-depth engagement with local culture, society and religion. While a full discussion of this topic is beyond our scope, it is evident that many representations of North African culture, society, religion and landscape highlighted various elements that Italian readers could relate to, in spite of other elements being strikingly different. Elements that Italian readers might relate to included: the role of religion in society, the mediterranean landscape, agriculture and crops, the climate of the coastal areas, but also village life, coffee houses and various other customs and venues represented as belonging to a common Mediterranean culture. It is not a coincidence that several critics who denounced the rampant orientalism in so much colonial literature insisted on the fact that Libya was not an oriental country, but a Mediterranean country: "Libya is not the Orient, it never has been. It is Mediterranean Africa, without exceptional rituals, without excessive perfumes, without mysterious, without 'harem', without odalisques, without elephants" (Guida 359)⁹; in a similar vein, Orazio Pedrazzi welcomed the fact that under fascism, the more fanciful depictions of North Africa had been replaced by a genuine Mediterranean literature on the area (Pedrazzi 543). From a broader perspective, the detailed depiction of Libyan settings in some of the novels that have been mentioned tied in with the multi-layered attitude of the fascist regime towards Libya: on the one hand, Libya was seen as an area with a culture fundamentally different from Italy, but on the other it was viewed also from a long-term historical perspective as Italy's southernmost province or "fourth shore" ("quarta sponda"), as it came to be commonly called in the course of the 1930s (Segrè 311-333). This image eventually seemed to warrant specific attitudes and policies towards the area's Muslim Arab population (Tomasello 163-64; Hopkins; see also the interesting case of Leda Raffanelli's novel *L'oasi* [*The Oasis*], in Casales 135-37).

However, in spite of all intentions and the extensive use of detailed information on local culture, these novels nevertheless still indulged in the fascination with some aspects of colonial reality and fell prey to stereotypical orientalist images. Mario Dei Gaslini, the editor-in-chief of the magazine *Esotica*, had repeatedly called for a colonial novel true to the actual reality of the colonies, yet his novels did not really meet the standards he himself wanted to set. His novels *Piccolo amore beduino* [*Small Bedouin Love*] (which in 1926 was awarded the first edition of the "Premio letterario coloniale" [Prize for Colonial Literature]) and *Le ombre dell'harem* were definitely not free from exotic clichés, as several critics were quick to point out (Cesari, Pozzi). The pleas for a truthful depiction of the colonies devoid of clichés remained in many cases "bombastic statements of intent" ("roboanti dichiarazioni d'intenti", Casales 117). A crucial element at play in the realism of the colonial novel had to do with its interdiscursive connections with the colonial library and its substantial amount of publications. Ranging from quite specialised volumes over surveys and reference works to illustrated books for a broader audience and colonial periodicals, the colonial library had produced ever since the start of the country's colonial endeavours, a wealth of widely different forms of knowledge (see Comberinati "'Africa'"). Colonial periodicals like *Esotica*, *L'Oltremare* and *L'Azione coloniale*, for instance, hosted contributions on historical, geographical, anthropological and many other forms of specialised knowledge. They also provided information on logistical projects and construction sites, ideological

propaganda, official speeches, economic statistics, updates on military campaigns and literature. Scientific contributions in periodicals often displayed a strong translational bias, as they frequently combined scientific data with references to potential or ongoing applications in colonial exploitation projects. The realism to which a mature colonial novel should attest resided in the obvious connections to this vast and diverse body of knowledge, most of which was heavily institutionalised and policy-oriented (as well as ideologically biased). Nevertheless, a genuinely realistic colonial novel should not be limited to a mere repackaging of more or less specialised knowledge in order to better inform and enthuse a lukewarm Italian public. The novel, while firmly anchored in a convincingly portrayal of colonial reality, should also transform this reality through the prism of the author's imagination and lived experience. This approach provided a global vision that offered readers a clear guide to understanding the colonial project from within, gaining insight into its deeper motivations, and becoming enthusiastic supporters of Italy's cause. In the words of Mario Pozzi, colonial writers should offer a "true, real and sincere documentation" ("vera, reale e sincera documentazione"), which consisted of a knowledge of colonial reality rooted in their personal experience, but at the same time it should process that documentation in such a way that it can contribute to an authentic "colonial conscience" (Pozzi 212). To achieve this effect, authors should balance documentation with imagination, ensuring that the former keeps the latter in check. In wielding their literary imagination, writers should steer away from clichéd exoticism and plotlines so commonly found in the literature of the dominant colonial powers (and, in particular, French literature is explicitly targeted). What contemporary Italian colonial writers should do is integrate and balance realism and imagination, keeping away from both purely documentary writing (which is more appropriate for travel accounts or essays) and exotic imagery out of touch with reality. Otherwise it would be better, as various writers explicitly stated in their answers to the "Referendum" organised by *L'Azione coloniale*, to renounce writing fiction on the colonies, for there were also plenty of alternatives: turn to "good popular books" on historical topics, as Massimo Bontempelli had it, or devote oneself to mere "historical and scientific literature" ("letteratura storica e scientifica"), as Antonio Bruers said, or also (as Giovanna Pesce stated) just recognise that a modern colonial literature eventually should rather be technical and informative in nature ("Referendum", reactions by Bontempelli, Bruers, Pesce).

Despite the widespread endorsement to a new kind of realistic colonial novel, grounded in the author's personal experience, this concept was not without its detractors. In particular, the question of whether Italy was truly ready for a mature colonial novel was a recurring theme among many authors. For a proper understanding of this issue, it is important to adopt a broader perspective, and to look at the role of literature in the development of an Italian national consciousness.

Colonial Literature: Nation and Narration

If there seemed to be little disagreement about the need for a genuinely realistic colonial novel free from orientalist stereotypes, there was a lot more (and at times quite heated) discussion about the kind of reading these novels should stimulate, the effects they should have on their readers, as well as their broader impact on Italian society. A crucial element was the need for a stronger colonial conscience in the general public; indeed, a colonial novel rooted in lived experience, field knowledge, and an inside understanding of colonial reality, was expected to make a substantial contribution to the emergence of a genuine commitment in the hearts and minds of the nation's citizens for the colonial enterprise, a commitment which (and on this point almost everybody

seems to agree) was still lacking in a large swathes of Italian society, which remained rather indifferent to the colonies. The novel had everything it took to function as an efficient instrument in the colonial pedagogy of the nation. It did so through its specific representational strategies and its ability to succinctly exemplify the colonial fabric, including its material conditions, social structures and logistical challenges, and adequately connect that reality to a broader perspective informed by the guiding principles of Italy's colonial project. The characters, settings and narrative dynamics were efficient means to combine a compelling storyline with a truthful evocation of colonial life while also conveying an overarching vision on the deeper motivation for Italian colonialism. In defining the colonial novel's desired effects, terms like propaganda, responsibility and commitment are commonly used to define the task of colonial writers, terms and definitions very much in line with how the regime envisaged the role of colonial literature (Casales 15); yet this view was met with quite some reservations from authors and critics, and also garnered some (more or less veiled) substantial critical comments. In fact, such a pedagogy required authors to write novels with a broad popular appeal and on specific themes, a mission that would be at odds with the claims that Italy lacked a specifically artistic colonial literature. In the referendum on colonial literature launched by the magazine *L'Azione coloniale* in the first months of 1931, a number of writers warned in more or less direct terms against the danger of subjecting literature to an ideological agenda, as this would reduce writers to mere promoters of policy choices. These reservations seemed to go against the grain of the regime's preferences, especially considering opinions from someone like Marco Pomilio, editor in chief of *L'Azione coloniale*, who actually emphasised literature's role as propaganda for the national-fascist cause (Pomilio). Yet, the caveat against reducing literature to political goals also conveniently played on the vague rhetoric the regime-friendly press regularly employed where artists' autonomy was concerned (see Turi, Mangoni, Ben Ghiat), usually with the scope of lowering the threshold for involvement. But that was not all, several authors and critics were also wary of this view for more fundamental reasons, that tied in with a broader diagnosis of Italian colonialism as well as with expectations formulated towards literature. Interestingly, at this point the criticism did not necessarily go against the grain of views expressed by regime officials. In fact, the fundamental *crux* of this discussion was already highlighted in the "Appello" in the very first issue of *L'Oltremare* quoted earlier in this article:

What is completely lacking is an artistic colonial literature. Nor is it understood how we could have it. Literature is, with regard to any field, the proof that national activity has reached maturity in that particular field. We have not yet reached colonial maturity. How could we establish a school of novelists and Africanist novelists, if the country is not Africanist, if in every expression directed to the realisation of colonialism the state still precedes the nation [...] ? ("Appello")¹⁰

In short, to paraphrase the famous motto on Italian unification attributed to Massimo D'Azeglio (see Gigante), the "Appello" seems to hold the view that "now that Italy has colonies, it is necessary to create colonials" ("fatte le colonie, ora bisogna fare i coloniali"). Similar arguments were repeated over the years in various interventions by writers and critics. Two years after the "Appello" of *L'Oltremare*, Mario Pozzi stated in the same periodical that "elevated manifestations of the human spirit" ("manifestazioni elevate dello spirito") could spring from phenomena that are fully understood or have a concrete and tangible basis in the reality and collective conscience

of the nation. And in Italy a "colonial conscience" (Pozzi 210; Dei Gaslini, "Colonialismo" 3) could be discerned only in a few Italians, and, as far as art is concerned, only in a handful of writers (Pozzi), meaning that expectations towards what the colonial novel could achieve should be lowered. In the referendum launched by *L'Azione Coloniale*, various authors picked up on this point to downplay literature's (or the novel's) potential to enhance the Italian general public's "colonial conscience". Counting on literary means to rapidly build and spread such a conscience was based on misgivings about the relation between literature and the nation. The novel definitely qualified as a useful literary means to transform experience and knowledge related to the colonies into a full-fledged artistic vision that conveyed a new conscience of colonial reality. Yet, this is a process that could not be artificially steered, nor could a novel simply invent or promote something that had insufficient ground in the broader culture without producing mere illusions. Before a truly mature colonial literature could see the light, there should be a sufficient basis in reality to enable building a genuine colonial conscience; hence it was unreasonable to expect novels to fully articulate such a colonial conscience before at least the basic prerequisites for this conscience were sufficiently present in Italian society and politics (Giovanni Pesce, Antonio Bruers, Dario Lischi, Fausto Maria Martini in "Referendum").

At this point, it is clear that reflections on the Italian colonial novel became entangled with the broader narrative of the nature and development of Italian colonialism that in its turn was heavily intertwined with that of the Italian nation as an age-old community of minds (guided by the great minds of art, literature and philosophy) and that after achieving political unity saw itself as a young and ambitious state eager to take its place among the great nations of Europe (which, however, seemed to look down on the country as its poor and somewhat naive sibling). The construction of a colonial empire was seen as part of an unfolding process of nation-building and self-assertion, which would help the process of nation-building gain momentum. This view was obviously not an invention of the 1920s but went back to the first decades of Italian political unity in the second half of the nineteenth century (Tomasello 29-56). Therefore, and not unsurprisingly, the discussion on the Italian colonial novel was not only closely connected to Italy's colonial enterprise, but also to Italy's ongoing development as a nation-state, its self-consciousness, and its position on the international map. Discussions on a new and truthful colonial novel eventually entered a much broader discussion on the ways in which the Italian nation-state wrote the narrative of its own development. In fact, since the *Risorgimento* literature had been considered as a powerful and dynamic means of self-understanding, through which the nation not only engaged in a process of self-awareness, but whose outcomes also further enhanced the nation's capacities of recognising and further finding its own destiny. The discussions on the colonial novel were informed by the general view on the dialectic relationship between nationhood, identity and literature which dominated Italian culture since the *Risorgimento* (and of which Francesco's *De Sanctis Storia della letteratura italiana*, published in 1871, was the most canonical expression). Regardless of the caveats expressed by writers and critics against a reduction of literature to propaganda, in the various interventions on the colonial novel one can nevertheless also recognise consistent attempts to single out elements that should facilitate some kind of dialectical interaction between colonial literature (especially the novel) and the Italian public's colonial conscience. In particular, the authorial function was repeatedly pointed out as a crucial factor in this respect. The main concern of all critics was that the colonial novel should spring from a lived experience, an in-depth knowledge of colonial reality, but also, and maybe first and foremost, from the author's actual

involvement in colonial reality, be it as a soldier, an official, an entrepreneur. A novel by this kind of author would be less prone to the overly novelistic and clichéd distortion of colonial reality (even though this is not always the case); more fundamentally, though, the status of the author was seen as the crucial factor guaranteeing a fruitful interaction between literature and colonial reality. A novel written by someone who was fully embedded in colonial reality and actively contributes to Italy's colonial endeavours had every chance of conveying a strong involvement in colonial reality also to the reader, in various ways: through a strikingly practical orientation (as opposed to an aesthetic and literary imagery), through the actions of characters fully integrated in colonial reality (as opposed to the superficial connection with colonial reality in novels written by occasional visitors), through the richly elaborated connections between knowledge and lived experience. In short, the author of this type of colonial novel should be a "man of action" ("uomo d'azione"), as opposed to a mere "man of letters" ("letterato") (Cesari; Tomasello 153-156); to be sure, the "man of action" could also be, though this happened less frequently, a "woman of action", and Augusta Perricone Violà can be mentioned as the most well-known example (see Venturini, "Al di là del mare" 2-4, Hopkins). Pleas for an authorship organic to colonial reality as opposed to the aloofness of the letterato perfectly tie in with how De Sanctis's *Storia della letteratura italiana* more than half a century earlier assessed the positive role of knowledge-driven and realist writers and philosophers in the dialectical interaction between literature and the nation, also in sharp contrast with a literary culture cut off from the nation. Similar views on the author as a man of action may echo elements of the masterplot of De Sanctis's highly influential *Storia della letteratura italiana*, be it that in the context of the late 1920s or early 1930s it may also be seen as concrete instantiations of the "actual idealism" elaborated by Giovanni Gentile.

Conclusion: The Compressed Temporalities of the Colonial Novel

The various reflections and statements quoted in the course of this article (all of which published in magazines more or less aligned with the fascist regime) respond to a common framework of reference, set for the most part by the regime's official discourse on colonial policy. This does not mean that all positions are in perfect agreement. There seems to be a more or less common stance on a number of elements, including the way in which the colonial novel should function within a specific (and obviously politically and ideologically inflected) knowledge culture associated with colonialism – or, conversely, on the need to simply give up on the novel if the genre cannot perform that function. Within this general position there are different perspectives on the topic, expressed sometimes in more veiled terms, sometimes in more outspoken ways. Examining these different views, their undertones and implications, one may be struck by the impression that they offer a compressed and condensed view of the literary history of Italy since the *Risorgimento*. The colonial novel seems to be the arena or a testing ground in which various ideas on literature (and especially the novel) come together, become intertwined, or collide with each other. Many of the views elaborated since the second half of the 19th century on the relations between literature and nation, and in particular in connection to the imperative of national rebirth, modernity and tradition, and the epistemic status of literature, are indeed projected in the discussions on colonial literature.

To begin with, the discussions on a new type of colonial novel that gave its readers a "true, real and sincere documentation" ("vera, reale e sincera documentazione", Pozzi 212) clearly resonated with the pleas for a new realism in Italian literature in the same years, and both discussions converged the need for

authentic and truthful representational strategies with a call for literature to fully engage with Italian society. With the colonial novel, however, some factors came into play that can be traced back to the role of *verismo* in the last decades of the nineteenth century (*verismo* was the distinctively Italian version of naturalism, much less prone to scientific ideals and much more aesthetically inflected than its French counterpart), and in particular *verismo*'s use of narrative fiction as a medium that artistically elaborated knowledge and concrete observation of various aspects of Italian society, thus advancing the public's awareness of the state of Italy. Interestingly, the discussion on the colonial novel can also be connected to issues of narrative techniques in many works of Italian *verismo*, and in particular with regard to the truthful and convincing representations of Italy's other, which in the years and decades after the country's political unification mostly meant the rural areas of southern Italy.

The plea for a colonial novel without exotic and sentimental frills and full of transformative and vital energy was perfectly in tune with Marinetti's futurist poetics, and therefore it is hardly surprising that Marinetti labeled this kind of colonial novel as futurist and distinctly modern. In addition, one can also (as is rightly pointed out in Tomasello 177-182) connect several of these colonial novels with the poetics of the *strapaese* movement, which from the mid-1920s onwards promoted a literature celebrating traditional values and set in regional (and often rural) surroundings, in stark contrast to the *stracittà* movement's enthusiasm for modernity. Indeed, for some protagonists the colonial experience is a way to escape the impending degeneration of modern civilisation and technology and to discover their true roots and mission in life again.

The primacy of the author as a man of action is in obvious ways linked to some elements of fascist ideology (and, as indicated, in a broader sense, can also be traced back to a dialectical-idealist view of literature), but the plea for an author as a man of action also means that colonial literature must convey a form of authentic personal engagement with the colonies and testify to the author's active participation in the colonial project. This came close to a literary model of testimonial literature from the *Risorgimento* years (or in more recent decades, to an idea of literature rooted in authentic experience as promulgated by authors associated to the influential journal *La Voce* [*The Voice*]), and in this sense some authors and critics also argued for simply leaving fiction behind; this was no time for novels, it was a time for action – or for literature that was directly rooted into action or associated with a direct involvement in the colonies. In short, reflections on a new kind of colonial novel rooted in genuine knowledge and experience of the colonies ultimately tie in with long-standing issues regarding Italian literature, national identity and (self-)knowledge. The discussion on the colonial novel is but one of the areas in which the fascist regime's attempts to foster a stronger colonial consciousness, in spite of its muscular nationalist rhetoric, eventually yielded more questions and doubts than convincing results.

Notes

1. "È fuor di dubbio che noi abbiamo scrittori coloniali. Ma essi non scrivono romanzi"; all translations are by Bart Van den Bossche.
2. "[...] storia, economia politica, e arte militare, costume, scienza e poesia; è un mondo espressivo ricchissimo e pieno di novità umana, offerto alla volontà e alla fantasia dell'uomo."
3. The referendum asked authors and critics to answer the following questions: 1) Does an Italian colonial literature exist? 2) If it exists, what are its characteristics, its tendencies, its merits and its shortcomings? 3) If such a literature does not exist, what are the causes of this deficiency, and what are the most appropriate means to remedy it? 4) Which is the colonial novel, among all those published so far in Italy, that best responds to the characteristics of a healthy and effective colonial literature? *L'Azione coloniale* published fifteen answers from authors and critics in five instalments.
4. "[...] non riesce tuttavia a liberarsi da quel romanticismo falso, che descrive mondi irreali e traccia orizzonti inesistenti."
5. "[...] stereotipate impressioni di nomadismo esotico, arbitrarie descrizioni di epici combattimenti, pennellate di vistoso color coloniale, inguaribilmente condite dei soliti eterni luoghi comuni."
6. "[...] scansare esagerate parzialità, mortificare l'enfasi, ringoiare le parole grosse, che sconciano le gote col gonfiore, svuotano le idee, vietano il varco alla commozione."
7. Perché, ripeto, il romanzo coloniale deve essere inteso qual rappresentazione diretta e obiettiva di personaggi e di vicende coloniali senza intervento, di psicologie estranee, che ne sarebbero come il correttivo o la pietra di paragone. È nel lettore e nel suo animo, che dobbiamo cercare la pietra di paragone; penserà lui, il lettore, a essere giudice di costumanze e di tipi esotici. L'io dell'autore non deve distrarre il pubblico dalla contemplazione d'un mondo, che lo interessa appunto perché non suo e lontano da lui" (Zuccoli XII-XIII).
8. "[...] la sincerità, il sentimento di profonda simpatia per i popoli cosiddetti inferiori, la loro completa comprensione, l'appassionato rammarico di essere giunti noi italiani in ritardo nell'arringo coloniale, mentre abbiamo tutte le qualità di perfetti colonizzatori, un sentimento assai più penetrante di quello dei francesi e degli inglesi, la volontà immodificata e immodificabile che si traduce in certezza di riuscire un giorno a correggere le ingiustizie coloniali del presente assetto africano ed asiatico ed infine il proposito, dimostrato dalla trattazione di ogni argomento coloniale e in ogni terra coloniale, di espanderci."
9. "La Libia non è Oriente, non lo è stata mai. È Africa mediterranea, senza riti eccezionali, senza eccessivi profumi, senza misteri, senza 'harem', senza odalische, senza elefanti."
10. "È una letteratura coloniale artistica che manca completamente. Né si comprende come potremmo averla. La letteratura è in qualsiasi campo la testimonianza che l'attività nazionale ha, in quel campo, toccata la maturità. Noi non abbiamo ancora raggiunto la maturità coloniale. Come si potrebbe avere una scuola di romanzieri e novellieri africanisti, se africanista il Paese non è, se in ogni espressione ad attuazione coloniale lo Stato ancora precede la Nazione [...]"

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