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‘Caring for the Sacred Heart’: Eliete, Memory, and (Im)Possible returns, or a Politics of Banality

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Das einige, was man vielleicht sagen kann, ist, daß das richtige Leben heute in der Gestalt des Widerstandes gegen die von dem fortgeschrittensten Bewußtsein durchschaute, kritisch aufgeloste Formen eines falschen Lebens bestünde.

Adorno, Probleme der Moralphilosophie

Eliete, ou a vida normal, [Eliete, or normal life], Dulce Maria Cardoso’s most recent novel (2018), presents readers with a forceful way of resisting the false, or bad, life that threatens to engulf us all in these ever darker times. Part of an announced trilogy, this seemingly unassuming reflection on daily events in contemporary Portugal from the perspective of the eponymous main protagonist, is a charged, complex, and profoundly ironic reflection on key concerns of our time, from the haunting presence of the Estado Novo and the figure of Salazar to the effacement of social and collective bonds in the constant pursuit of illusory individualism. It is also a crucial questioning of what may be seen, even beyond the national sphere, as a specifically European malaise, resulting from an unassumed, rejected, and denied, postimperial condition laid bare through a painful and precarious exercise of memory against its erasure. Memory and its loss, either as the result of aging or because of societal amnesiac trends, are at the core of a novel that is also a forceful act of resistance against a politics of banality that threatens to erase who we are. Thus, I would like to start with the novel’s last question: ‘Não te vais apagar agora, pois não, Eliete?’ [You are not going to extinguish yourself now, are you Eliete?].

1 This essay was prepared partially for project MEMOIRS – Children of Empires and European Postmemories, funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 648624).
2 Theodor W. Adorno, Probleme der Moralphilosophie, ed. by Thomas Schröder (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, [2003] 2018), 248-249. ‘The only thing that can perhaps be said is that the good life today would consist in resistance to forms of the bad life that have been seen through and critically dissected by the most progressive minds’, Problems of Moral Philosophy, ed. by Thomas Schröder, transl. by Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 167-168.
Dulce Maria Cardoso has been steadily pushing the limits of the novel genre since her first novel, *Campo de Sangue* [*Field of Blood*]⁴ was first published in 2002. Although she has drawn critical acclaim – that first novel already was awarded the Grande Prémio Acontece – detailed critical analysis of her work is still somewhat incipient. And yet, I would maintain, from her generation Dulce Maria Cardoso stands out not only in terms of originality and importance of the questions her fiction addresses, but also because of their direct reflection on, registering of, and intervention in, contemporary Portuguese society. Not at all paradoxically, those are the very qualities that also make her work reach well beyond the local and daily concerns and it is no surprise that her novel, *O Retorno* [*The Return*] has garnered international attention and has been the first of her works to be translated into English.⁵

The recent, relative, success of Portugal in navigating out of the danger zone of imminent bankruptcy, the ability of a government formed out of once improbable compromises among almost all Left political parties – the so-called ‘geringonça’ [contraption]⁶ – risk blinding us to the extent to which, as a polity, Portugal is still very much under the spell of its past and especially, the spectral legacy of nearly fifty years of dictatorship, a desperate holding on to the idea of empire as defining for the nation, and a still large incapacity to properly process personal and collective historical trauma. Dulce Maria Cardoso in all of her work has been concerned with questions of memory. In the most recent novel this is done as subtly as it is forceful. I am interested in starting to open up views to understanding how she successfully confronts readers with some of the most pressing questions of our time, the radical changes operated through our growing dependency on technology and new means of communication, as well as our unending confrontation with ethical dilemmas and choices. How can one strive to

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⁴ Dulce Maria Cardoso, *Campo de Sangue* (Lisboa: Asa, 2002). The title refers to the place in Jerusalem, associated with treason and death, where Judas is said to be buried: ‘*Acedama* (RV, Akeldama). “The field of blood”, a piece of land in the neighbourhood of Jerusalem, so named (1) acc. To Mt. 27:8, because it was bought with the price of the Lord’s blood; but (2) acc. To Acts 1:18 f., because it was the scene of Judas Iscariot’s tragic end.’, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, eds. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 10.


lead a good life in an ethical sense, when values, virtues, and norms, seem to be upended everywhere and always? How can one be true to oneself and yet not succumb to the siren call of narcissism, which, under the guise of individual liberty, threatens to destroy the very notion of society? How to survive all the conflicting pressures of daily life in a neo-liberal order predicated on the primacy of capital above all? Some of Theodor Adorno’s thought guides my reading of Eliete and its exposure of the dangers that threaten us all under the guise of banality.

Although not assembled as a novel of detection, Eliete leads the reader from discovery to discovery. A crucial one only comes at the end of the narrative and refers to an object intended for religious devotion, the ‘Sacred Heart’, which reveals itself as the holder of a deeply kept secret that will unsettle Eliete and her sense, not only of herself but of her past and with that, I would argue, the national past as well. That revelation will force the reader into a new understanding of the preceding narrative and of what might have appeared merely banal at its beginning. I am interested in reflecting on the various ways in which Eliete, without ever slipping into sentimentality, and much less nostalgia, presents readers with a critical, yet always compassionate, view of Portuguese society and its ghosts. The question of returning, itself always adjacent to that of belonging, is one that can be traced throughout much of contemporary fiction. In Dulce Maria Cardoso’s case, of course, this is made more significant due to the problematic history of decolonisation, which she lived through, as one of the thousands of people who ‘returned’ from the Portuguese colonies in 1974 and 1975, and which is explicitly thematised in O Retorno [The Return]. Eliete combines elements of both memory as well as postmemory, a term first advanced by Marianne Hirsch in relation to the memory of the Holocaust but which, increasingly, has come to be seen as equally important to understand postcolonial and postimperial issues.

There is a growing body of scholarship on this vexed question of Portuguese recent history, which until recently, was still left largely unspoken. See for instance, Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, Uma História de Regressos. Império, Guerra Colonial e Pós-Colonialismo (Porto: Afrontamento, 2004) and Ana Cristina Mendes, Remembering and fictionalizing inhospitable Europe: The experience of Portuguese retornados in Dulce Maria Cardoso’s The Return and Isabela Figueiredo’s Notebook of Colonial Memories, Journal of Postcolonial Writing 53.6 (2017): 729-742.

In the figure of Eliete we have a woman whose sense of self becomes more and more shattered through the pressures of daily life, the increasing solitude within a family ever more atomised, seemingly unable to connect except through the mediation effected by the screens of their respective electronic devices and the entire machinery behind them, and the loneliness of an unexceptional, indeed, banal, marriage. Yet, rather than presenting us with a dire dystopian universe of petty-bourgeois suburbia, or some sort of jeremiad against the supposed evils of (post)modernity, technology, and social media, Dulce Maria Cardoso lets us see in Eliete a woman who exercises agency and who, even if she initially gets deeper and deeper into a virtual life in which the void she feels just widens every day, struggles to emerge and regain a sense of her own life and how she wants to live it, in a lesson not so much of optimism but of resistance.

In itself the plot of Eliete might appear simple. The main protagonist and narrator is a middle age, barely middle class woman, whose life is not going anywhere. Placed in between a husband and two daughters who hardly seem aware of her, a difficult mother, and especially a grandmother losing her memory, nothing really happens that cannot be viewed under the overarching category of normalcy. Or so it seems, for the novel is made as much, if not more, of that which is present as of that which is absent. That very notion of normalcy and the seeking of happiness, the illusion of happiness derived from the supposed normalcy, are constantly subjected to the pulling of various tensions in a process that is, at its core, dialectic. The passage the publisher used to entice readers to find out more about the novel, and thus presumably to buy it, is immensely rich in suggestion, pointing out to impending disaster at the very moment of recalling the most enviable harmony: ‘O tempo era tanto mais lento quanto eu vivesse dentro dele e não no futuro ou no passado. Quanto mais presa ao presente, mais lento o tempo passava, mais feliz eu era. (…) Ser feliz de forma plena era a maneira de experimentar a imortalidade. Mas sendo a felicidade provisória, era mortal, a imortalidade’. ‘Time was the more slow the more I would live inside it, rather than in the future or in the past. The more I was shackled to the present, the more slowly time would pass, and the happier I was. (…) To be happy in full was a way of experiencing immortality. But, as happiness is but momentary, so
too immortality was mortal

Even if the plot keeps its semblance of simplicity then, as that passage already amply demonstrates, nothing is really what it seems.

Given the success of the previous novel readers might have wondered whether the author might have been able to keep the same level of personal obsession, the same density of writing that nonetheless is always exceedingly clear, the painful engagement with the past and memory that so marked O Retorno. In my view Eliete not only manages to meet the challenge but takes the problematics evident in the previous novel, and markedly the question of memory, to a higher level. Although still bearing autobiographical traces, Eliete is subtler. The very name of Eliete might refer directly to the author's life as that was the name her father had initially chosen for her, and the setting of Cascais that shimmers through the novel – though not that of the well-to-do bourgeois zones – also harks back to Maria Dulce Cardoso’s childhood, but they are also highly transformed. The bold cover by Vera Tavares, depicting the façade of some houses with a palm tree in front, that are being submerged by the waters – itself based on Cascais – is perhaps one of the best representations of the novel's transformed reality and how 'chaos' and the 'normal' go hand in hand, or to cite the author, 'A normalidade é uma capa onde se pode esconder o mais terrível' [Normalcy is a cover where one can hide that which is most terrible].

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9 Cardoso, Eliete, p. 100.
10 This information derives in part from conversations with the author, and for which I here express my thanks; but can also be gathered from one of the interviews given to the press on the occasion of the novel’s publication. See for instance the interview with Ana Sousa Dias, published for TSF Radio Noticias on 28 November, 2018, https://www.tsf.pt/sociedade/a-normalidade-e-uma-capa-onde-se-pode-esconder-o-mais-terrivel-10250436.html, Accessed 27 December, 2019.
11 Cardoso, interview, 2018.
To get back to the novel’s concluding question, which is my starting point: what is that question doing at the end of the novel? On the one hand it signals towards the future, a writing still to come in the announced volumes of a trilogy; on the other hand, it is, as with so much, if not all, in this novel, looking over the shoulder towards the past: both the writing that has just come to an end in its very refusal to end – a writing that has been temporarily suspended – and the past that the writing has started to unravel. For this novel, solidly grounded in the now, in a fierce, though not unkind, critique of the present, its dangers and failings, is also very much a conjuring of the past through memory, both its loss
and erasure as well as its unearthing. That question is also a metanarrative inquiry that cuts through the novel’s seeming fascination with banality. Reading is always a highly subjective and personal experience that shifts with time. My first reading of this novel had me grapple with trying to find anchoring points in a narrative that so skillfully mimics the very banality it both registers and critiques. The opening of the novel is as unusual as its conclusion but for very different reasons: ‘Eu sou eu e o Salazar que se foda’ [I am I and Salazar can go fuck himself].¹² That simple, apparently pleonastic, affirmation of what seems like an uncomplicated form of identity at its most basic could be read as yet another instance of the current trend towards using obscenity as a way of getting readers’ attention. However, it actually not only is its opposite, but its very denouncing. The proliferation of titles that deploy mild forms of obscenity – and the word ‘fuck’ is perhaps the most common of these – has not gone unnoticed by critics. Its ubiquity makes one question whether it can actually still serve its purpose of attracting a certain kind of reader with the facile promise of rebelling against social norms while enjoying complete impunity. Surely by now even the kind of reader who would be drawn into such vicarious gratification must have caught on to the manipulation? But the facts can be more than sobering and help us understand banality’s perniciousness.

Consider, for example, one of the most prominent examples of that trend, Mark Manson’s The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck. Published in 2016, it became number one in The New York Time’s list of best-sellers in the category of ‘How-To’ books; in spite of some momentary slips, on October 6, 2019, after 145 weeks, it still kept that place. By now it has sold over eight million copies and has been translated into at least twenty-five languages. In Portugal and Brazil it also made the top of several charts, becoming the most sold book in 2018 in Portugal. Remarkable as that may be it would perhaps be better left unmentioned altogether were it not for the fact that such trends are never innocent; rather, they too are symptomatic, even if never really more than that, of a profound crisis in a society where almost unimaginable affluence goes hand in hand with the cruelest forms of inequality and where large swaths of the population desperately seek guidance on how to lead their lives. Reflecting the immediate

¹² Cardoso, p. 11.
instability felt by many in the United Kingdom as a consequence of the 2016 referendum on whether to leave the European Union, *The Guardian* could report on March 2019, that ‘Stressed Brits buy record number of self-help books. Bookshop owners say political turmoil has sent customers in search of uplifting titles’. This, however, should not be seen in any way as exclusive to Great Britain, but rather as symptomatic of a wider trend throughout industrialised nations.

And that exhortation in the shape of a question, with which the novel closes for now, in which both fear and hope mix, could be seen as diametrically opposed to precisely that glib, narcissistic, and entropic turn that books like Mason’s both feed on and help to propagate.13 One of the key issues in all of Dulce Maria Cardoso’s writing concerns the fundamental question of what constitutes a good life and what is the portion of responsibility that each one of us bears inasmuch as we claim to still have agency. Even if it might seem that this is especially so in the case of *Elite*, I would maintain that it is already there and centrally so, in that very first novel of 2002. This is how *Campo de Sangue* starts, after an epigraph from the Book of Wisdom: ‘Estão quatro mulheres na sala. Destas mulheres é preciso saber antes de tudo que estão aqui por causa de um homem que cometeu um crime e que se por acaso se encontrassem na rua não se cumprimentariam’ [There are four women in the room. It must be known, before anything else, about these women, that they are here because of a man who has committed a crime and that, if by chance they would meet on the street they would not greet each other].14 Speaking about that novel at the International Book Fair of Guadalajara in 2018 Dulce Maria Cardoso made it very clear how that man, the centre of the narrative, represents a kind of void: ‘É sobre um homem, uma espécie de homem vazio, que existe para agradar aos outros’ [It’s about a man, a kind of empty man, who exists to please others]. At the same time she also explains how what she had in mind when writing the novel in the ‘90s, was a kind of ‘mental illness’, that by now has taken rot and become normalized. That void, then is how Dulce Maria Cardoso refers to a sort of emptiness of purpose and character that sets people adrift, propelled solely by how the various social media

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13 This entropic turn can also be seen as characteristic for a new nihilistic age coming in the wake of neo-liberalism. See Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neo-Liberalism: The Rise of Anti-Democratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
networks prop them up, as we became our own simulacra: ‘(...) vinte anos depois, e muito estranhamente, passámos muito a ser isto. Passámos a ser esses simulacros de nós próprios, relativamente vazios (...)’. [Twenty years after, and, very strangely, we became this. We became those simulacra of ourselves, relatively empty (...)][15] One of the differences then, between the first novel and the most recent one is the fact that the pervasiveness of social media has now become the norm rather than being an exception. Another is that whereas in the first novel that man is still placed at the centre, all of the male characters in Eliete have become mere secondary characters, more absent than present, from the ghostly figure of Salazar, passing through Eliete’s dead father, or her multiple one-night stands, all the way to the figure of Jorge, her unassuming, unsuspecting, and foremost, uninteresting, husband. Yet, the concern with how to act, how to live the good life, with how to find one’s ethical compass, that was already the driving force of the first novel has only, if anything, become stronger.

Dulce Maria Cardoso’s writing is never moralistic, the same way that it remains sober and avoids any form of either sentimentality or bombast. Eliete is a haunting book, yet its ghosts, however terrible, whether that of Salazar and all that name implies, from the whole of nearly five decades of Portuguese fascism, to that of Portugal’s colonial and imperial past, do not jump at us. Perhaps, that apparent effacement only makes those specters more powerful because, in a sense, their near absence makes their presence ever stronger. The first literal mention of ghosts occurs late in the narrative and refers not to those ghosts of the past I just mentioned but rather to the ghosts of the present, the virtual lives the family has come to embrace:

Quando estávamos juntos, passara a ser habitual que as miúdas e o Jorge consultassem o telemóvel, a Internet, o Facebook, o Instagram, que trocassem mensagens enquanto eu estava a falar com eles. (...) Acabei por me calar, e a nossa vivência familiar passou a incluir os fantasmas a que cada um deles tinha acesso e com quem muitas vezes pareciam dar-se melhor ou entreter-se melhor do que comigo.

‘When we were together it started being usual that the girls and Jorge would consult their smart phones, the Internet, Facebook, Instagram, that they would exchange messages while I was talking with them. (...) I ended up shutting myself up and our family life started to include the ghosts each one of them had access to and with whom often it seemed they could get along better, or entertain themselves better, than with me’.16

Dulce Maria Cardoso does not reject the technological transformations that brought on the proliferation of social media platforms, nor the fact that they transformed us all. Rather, alerts us to the way in which instead of using the new platforms to truly improve ourselves, we allow them to take over us and further empty our lives while pretending to fill them. As such their use comes close to our inordinate desire for the magic solutions conveyed in the self-help manuals. As she mentioned to Ana Sousa Dias, what she decries is the lack of thinking that characterizes our use of the new media and the danger inherent in our collective blindness to the very way we are being changed: ‘as redes sociais (...) mudaram-nos e a maior parte da nossa vida passou a ser virtual. Inclusivamente, como está no romance, o sexo é muito virtual embora, por definição, precise do corpo. Nós estamos a mudar e não perceber isso é perigoso. [Social media networks (...) have changed us and most of our lives have become virtual. Including, as stated in the novel, the fact that sex has become very virtual even though by definition it needs the body. We are changing, and not noticing it is dangerous].17

The question though is not so much whether or not we are aware of what is happening to us, but what can one do with such knowledge? Perhaps there are still some intellectuals who either pretend that social media does not affect them or that have themselves become so enmeshed in what Richard Seymour

16 Cardoso, p. 171.
17 Cardoso, interview, 2018. Compare, for instance, the observations made by James Bridle in The New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future (London: Verso, 2018): ‘Over the last century, technological acceleration has transformed our planet, our societies, and ourselves, but it has failed to transform our understanding of these things. The reasons for this are complex, and the answers are complex too, not least because we ourselves are utterly enmeshed in technological systems, which shape in turn how we act and how we think. We cannot stand outside them; we cannot think without them’, p. 2.
designates as the 'twittering machine' – to use an overarching term encompassing the various forms of social media and associated networks, all complicit in expanding late capital’s control over individuals – they cannot but go on reproducing it.\textsuperscript{18} The popular phrase, 'If you didn’t post it, did it really happen?' could be used to illustrate this. For all the supposed questioning of the way social media can, and does, alter our perception of reality, as well as its simulation of rebellion with a tongue-in-cheek criticism of the machine’s operations, such a phrase inevitably became incorporated back into the machine, was made to further solidify its reach and glorify its appeal.

In a recent review of Richard Seymour’s \textit{The Twittering Machine}, Oliver Eagleton points out some of the book’s key points: ‘Seymour begins by asserting that the incredible popularity of the Twittering Machine (his shorthand for the online social industry) testifies to the degradation of social life under late capitalism. (...) Social media promises the limitless reign of the pleasure principle, and this fantasmal quality is what enchants techno-utopians’. Yet, as Eagleton does not fail to note, in Seymour’s view social media is inherently and ‘irredeemably reactionary’.\textsuperscript{19} This is at any rate debatable, and I would side with Eagleton’s view that Seymour’s position is flawed because ‘[a]long with the dubious contention that competition and hierarchy are distinctly “fascist” traits, rather than simply capitalist ones, this critique relies on a series of monolithic assumptions’.\textsuperscript{20}

This critical, precise, distinction, I think, is also what distinguishes Dulce Maria Cardoso’s deployment of social media as the instrument through which betrayal – either in the sense of marital infidelity or, more troubling even, as a form of self-annihilation – is effected. \textit{Eliete} is a scathing indictment against all kinds of blind optimism that have led us to sell ourselves, becoming complicit with the very forces that oppress us, in the pursuit of continuous, if possible instant, self-gratification. This becomes nowhere more obvious than in our blind belief in the power of technology to free us, even when we see it time and again being diverted towards further enslavement. As such she is much closer, if

anything, to the perspective Adorno voiced in mid-twentieth century. In one of the fragments from *Minima Moralia*, Adorno has this to say:

> Die Technisierung macht einstweilen die Gesten präzis und roh und damit die Menschen. Sie treibt aus den Gebärden alles Zögern aus, allen Bedacht, alle Gesittung. Sie unterstellt sie den unversöhnlichen, gleichsam geschichtslosen Anforderungen der Dinge. (...) In den Bewegungen, welche die Maschinen von den sie Bedienenden verlangen, liegt schon das Gewaltsame, Zuschlagende, stoßweis Unaufhörliche der faschistischen Mißhandlungen.

> [Technology is making gestures precise and brutal, and with them men. It expels from movements all hesitation, deliberation, civility. It subjects them to the implacable, as it were a-historical demands of objects. (...) The movements machines demand of their users already have the violent, hard-hitting, unresting jerkiness of Fascist maltreatment].

Yet, as Adorno also makes clear throughout, the real problem is not with technology but rather with us, humans, letting ourselves become more and more like machines and with the abandonment of our common human frailty also losing our individuality and with it the ability to know good from evil. The following, for instance, reads uncannily as a description of social media as registered in *Eliete*:

> Die Eigenschaften, von der echten Freundlichkeit bis zum hysterischen Wutanfall, werden bedienbar, bis sie schließlich ganz in ihrem situationsgerechten Einsatz aufgehen. Mit ihrer Mobilisierung verändern sie sich. Sie bleiben nur noch als leichte, starre und leere Hülsen von Regungen

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zurück, beliebig transportabler Stoff, eigenen Zuges bar. Sie sind nicht mehr Subjekt, sondern das Subjekt richtet sich auf sie als sein inwendiges Objekt.

[Character traits, from genuine kindness to the hysterical fit of rage, become capable of manipulation, until they coincide exactly with the demands of a given situation. With their mobilization they change. All that is left are the light, rigid, empty husks of emotions, matter transportable at will, devoid of anything personal. They are no longer the subject; rather, the subject responds to them as to his internal object].

Half-way through the narrative, we are told that Eliete decides to subscribe to Tinder using as a pseudonym the name of Mónica, and seems to cease being lonely from the start: ‘Entrei pela mão da Mónica num catálogo cheio de homens de todas as idades (…). O meu primeiro match era divertido (…) Já não estava só’. [Mónica led me through a catalogue full of men of all ages. (…) My first match was fun (…) I was no longer alone]. Playing Tinder as a kind of game, like any other computer game, it should be noted that Eliete first creates a different self to enter that alternate world: Mónica. Eliete, however, feels more and more the need to fashion Mónica in her own image, so that her persona from the beginning, rather than being an alter-ego, has conditions similar to her own, a husband and two children, though these are boys rather than girls. More significantly though is the fact that Eliete is not only interested in using her avatar as a stand in for herself, she wants to use it so as to discover what strangers think of her. This leads her successively to change her rule of not using photographs to then first steal the face of someone else – as far away as possible, in Australia, obviously using the internet as a source – then, step by step replacing that image with images of her own body. This gradual re-incorporation of Eliete in herself goes hand in hand with her gradual incorporation into the machine. Or perhaps it might be more accurate to say that it is precisely her incorporation into the machine, her increasing virtualisation, that allows for her progressive shedding of the borrowed features. In other words, as Eliete becomes more confident, and

23 Cardoso, p. 163.
more comfortable with the machine, the more she can go back to her self. Except that her previous self no longer exists. The price, one could say, for her virtualization is the irremediable loss of her self to the machine. The woman who goes on with her daily routine, takes care of her senile and increasingly dement grandmother, and otherwise still functions, for all appearances as a devoted wife and mother, is simply imperceptibly replaced. Or, as Adorno also said in the same fragment just cited, ‘The ego consciously takes the whole man into its service as a piece of apparatus. In this re-organization the ego as business-manager delegates so much of itself to the ego as business-mechanism, that it becomes quite abstract, a mere reference-point: self-preservation forfeits its self’. Indeed, as Eliete herself recognizes, the irony is that ‘só ganhei tranquilidade quando o Tinder deixou de ser um jogo e comecei a correr riscos’. [I only gained tranquility when Tinder stopped being a game and I started taking risks].

Should it be a surprise that in Eliete it is not possible to separate the ethical from the political? At one point in her interview with Ana Sousa Dias, an interview which functions as a sort of map for reading the novel, Dulce Cardoso, after noting how the character of Eliete tells her things for a future writing, calls attention to how Salazar frames the novel and how, in her questioning of identity she came to understand that she was the heir of Salazar, indeed, ‘maybe we all are’ ([p]ossivelmente seremos todos’). Well, some more than others of course. And while some will assume that inheritance as an imperative to never forget, to never let totalitarianism slip unnoticed under the mantle of normalcy, others will accept it for their immediate, silent convenience and comfort, when not actually, more or less openly, invoking it. Dulce Maria Cardoso compares the past under the dictatorship with its secret police, political prisons, censorship and torture to our present situation, only seemingly devoid of all that in an illusory and false normalcy: ‘Essa tal normalidade que não tem as erupções da tortura, não tem picos de sofrimento ou de horror, para mim é mais perigosa’ [That normalcy

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25 Cardoso, p. 169.
26 Cardoso, interview, 2018. The passage in question reads: ‘O romance é enquadrado pela figura do Salazar e, para ver o Salazar na vida da Eliete, há uma série de mistérios e de segredos que são complexos. O Salazar enquadra ali a vida normal. O romance, para mim, é sobre a identidade e ao questionar-me sobre a identidade, a da Eliete, a minha, e por arrasto a do país, eu percebi que era herdeira do Salazar. Possivelmente seremos todos’. 
which does not have the eruptions of torture, does not have the peaks of suffering or horror, for me, it is more dangerous].\textsuperscript{27} And as her interviewer asks whether the increased danger might be due to the permanency of such ‘normalcy’, Dulce Maria Cardoso clarifies beyond any possibility of doubt: ‘É o que passa, o que se infiltra, o que forma e deforma. É mais perigosa’ [‘It’s what goes by, what gets ingrained, that which forms and deforms. It is more dangerous].\textsuperscript{28}

For readers familiar with the work of Dulce Maria Cardoso it also should be no surprise that this novel represents yet another instalment in her working through of memory, personal as well as collective, and of its imbrication in the political. The first time the narrative explicitly calls attention to the question of memory, it has Eliete nervously trying to fit things from her older daughter’s room into the building’s storage area, already crammed full with other objects and being confronted with her own past: ‘Sete horas de uma tarde de verão e eu a respirar com a barriga (...). A técnica de relaxamento revelava-se impotente contra o caos do interior da arrecadação e o caos de memórias para onde era arrastada de cada vez que espreitava para dentro de um caixote (...)’ [‘Seven o’clock on a summer afternoon and I was belly breathing (...). The relaxing technique was impotent against the chaos inside the storage room and the chaos of memories unto which I was dragged every time that I peeked into one of the boxes (...)]\textsuperscript{29}

In that laden moment of trying to put away her daughter’s belongings to make space for her grandmother’s, what troubles Eliete is not the lack of space. Rather, it is the way in which although the past never really goes away, although one cannot ever just go back, memory has the ability to simulate reality and, even if ever fleetingly, give the impression of a temporal fusion: ‘Avistava estilhaços da minha vida, uns mais cortantes, outros mais rombos, uns mais brilhantes, outros mais baços. Ao abrir um pequeno caixote, as minhas agendas do Banco Português do Atlântico e eu, no início de cada ano em casa da mamã (...)’ [‘I glimpsed shards from my life, some sharper, others blunter, some brighter, others duller. As I opened a small box, the diaries from the Portuguese Bank of the Atlantic and I, at the beginning of every year in mother’s house (...)].\textsuperscript{30} But the question of memory was already there from

\textsuperscript{27} Cardoso, interview, 2018.
\textsuperscript{28} Cardoso, interview, 2018.
\textsuperscript{29} Cardoso, p. 70.
\textsuperscript{30} Cardoso, p. 70
the very beginning even if on a casual reading one might be excused for missing it. Perhaps that expletive sentence at the opening of the novel also serves to throw readers off the right track, making them concentrate on the casualness of the language, instead of being gripped by the force of the memory being invoked in the name of Salazar, Portugal’s decades of fascist control, its continuous hold and even its very appropriation of the present: ‘Eu sou eu e o Salazar que se foda. Um ditador governa Portugal quase meio século, quase outro meio passa desde a sua morte, até que aparece na minha vida. De repente, foi como se sempre aqui tivesse estado e tomasse conta de tudo. Eu não podia deixar que isso acontecesse’ [I am I and Salazar can go fuck himself. A dictator rules Portugal for almost half a century, yet another almost half a century goes by since he died, until he shows up in my life. Suddenly, it was as if he had always been here and would take over everything. I could not let that happen].

In Eliete the personal is highly political and the collective memory of the nation itself is deeply imbricated with the family memory – or rather, its failed, silenced, secret, memory, which is another way of making that which is absent become more powerful than that which is openly present. The question of the reappearance of Salazar, ‘as if he had always been [t]here’ is only one side of the question; its reverse can be seen in the grandmother’s loss of memory; a loss of memory which, in turn, occasions the revelation towards the end of the novel of a dark secret, that of Salazar’s presumed paternity of Eliete’s father, as Eliete goes to the grandmother’s empty apartment and finds an old letter hidden inside a devotional object, a wooden figure representing the ‘Sacred Heart of Jesus’. The novel’s conclusion, for all its seeming simplicity is in itself a narrative tour de force, with that wooden figure and its hidden, secret contents, both absent and present, indeed at the very core of, and inside the heart of, the family, as its pièce de résistance. In it converge the political and the familiar, the collective and the personal, and also the deep religiosity, especially in its more popular forms, which had always been deployed to excuse, justify, and legitimise totalitarian rule. As a sign of consummate skill, Dulce Maria Cardoso goes one step further, for what triggers the conclusion is a visit to the grandmother in her nursing home and the fact that instead of the customary words upon Eliete’s departure, the grandmother

31 Cardoso, p. 11.
had exhorted her to take care of the ‘Sacred Heart’: ‘Cuida do Sagrado Coração’. This message from the grandmother, who then remains silent, is nothing but a cypher for Eliete, yet it consists in the key to the hidden, absent but never forgotten, legacy. Sitting by herself in the grandmother’s empty apartment Eliete all too easily lets the memories of her past life take over. Perhaps all too easily: ‘Não gostava de ficar sozinha em casa da avó, tinha a sensação de convocar a companhia dos fantasmas, não precisava de fechar os olhos para me ver na festa de anos ou para encontrar a mamã tão mais nova ali sentada a ver televisão (...)’ [I did not like to stay alone in grandmother’s house, I did not need to close her eyes to see myself at the birthday party or to find my mother, so much younger, sitting there watching television (...)]. In order to free herself from those memories and their haunting feeling Eliete decides to call her lover, whom she would usually meet there to ask him to come to her. As he starts driving towards her he starts giving her sexual instructions on the telephone – and we should keep in mind precisely Dulce Maria Cardoso’s observation of how we are all becoming virtual, absent, yet present: ‘O Duarte estava longe, mas (...) apesar de não estar com ele, quase tudo podia ser como se estivesse’ [Duarte was far away, but (...) even though I was not with him, almost everything could be as if I were]. As this passage shows, by then Eliete’s entry into the machine has become almost total as absence comes to substitute nearly perfectly for presence even in terms of sex, the one activity one might think still required the materiality of bodies.

Even though the novel ends with an open question – or perhaps the question is rather a plea, a wish, a desire, for a free future – it brings together many of the seemingly loose strands that make up the novel’s complex narrative weaving, from the grandmother’s memory loss, to the secrets of the past, Eliete’s paradoxical rebellion via social media that both affirms and annuls her at the same time, and the impossibility to avoid the question of empire. The novel’s narrative structure is not circular, if anything it moves forward by always retracing a few steps from the past as it proceeds in its work of memory. Yet, even if there are plenty of clues throughout, it is only at the conclusion that one can fully grasp what the novel had been saying all along. In the light of the conclusion, the novel’s beginning is of

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32 Cardoso, p. 279.
33 Cardoso, p. 281.
34 Cardoso, p. 281.
course much more than a simple venting of Eliete’s frustration at the nation’s legacy of fascism – it is her resolute resistance, once she becomes aware of how personal that inheritance is, to let it take over her life. There can be no question of Eliete remembering Portugal under fascism, as she was a young child when the April Revolution took place. Until she finds the hidden letter she also had no idea about Salazar’s seduction of her grandmother either. The memories that she has are thus both real and false. Like so much else in the novel they seem to be one thing and yet are another, hiding inside them a legacy of violence, personal as well as collective. The novel is a direct confrontation with the propensity towards amnesia that threatens to engulf our frenetic society,\textsuperscript{35} in spite of, or perhaps rather because of, the seeming ease of recording and thus both preserving and transmitting memory. Reflecting on the posting of snapshots on social media and the thousands of photographs recording one’s past, Eliete thinks that,

\begin{quote}
[t]alvez a possibilidade de registo exaustivo estivesse a mudar a nossa memória (...), o registo exaustivo de tudo o que fazíamos estava a tornar-nos outros, e nunca ninguém dava conta porque quase nunca se dava conta de nada a não ser quando a realidade nos entrava pelos olhos dentro, e, mesmo assim, preferíamos cegar a ver.
\end{quote}

[maybe the possibility of exhaustive recording was changing our memory (...), the exhaustive recording of everything we do was making us others, and no one noticed because one almost never noticed anything unless reality would pierce through our eyes, and, even so, we preferred to go blind rather than see].\textsuperscript{36}

\begin{quote}
It is no coincidence that those reflections are brought about by the consideration of family photographs – of her grandmother and the dog – posted by one of her daughters on social media, and of Eliete’s realization that there were
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{35} Noted historian Steve Fraser has recently even referred to the USA as ‘Our United States of Amnesia’ in Mongrel Firebugs and Men of Property: Capitalism and Class Conflict in American History (London: Verso, 2019), p. 19 and p. 56.

\textsuperscript{36} Cardoso, p. 129.
none of herself. In a sense, her subsequent reflections are already an act of resistance that rails against the need to post photographs on social media in order to validate one’s experience, as if without them, that experience would dissolve as if it had never happened. Instead, in Eliete’s mind it is the very inescapability of the banal images that makes us unable to see. It is also no coincidence that when Marianne Hirsch first developed her concept of postmemory she did so on the basis of her examination of photographs and very specifically of family albums. In *The Generation of Postmemory* Hirsch analyses how she came to reflect on the tangled questions of how children of survivors relate to the traumas they themselves did not undergo yet completely marked their lives. From the beginning the notion of postmemory is thus linked with the question of absence and presence, and with the visual – even if her own initial experience of postmemory is verbal, it will be the confrontation with family photo albums that will bring about and shape postmemory, which has assumed crucial critical importance. In the case of Portugal, that must also always refer to the violence of colonialism. Dulce Maria Cardoso’s previous novel, *O Retorno*, outlining the conditions of those who ‘returned’ from Africa to Portugal after the former colonies gained independence, extensively explores the multiple elements of trauma that still condition Portuguese society in the present, and critics did not hesitate to comment on its treatment of memory. However, the way in which that book already is much more a book of postmemory in the sense of its coming, almost four decades after the traumatic events, to reflect on loss and with it on the impossibility of any return in time to a pre-lapsarian era of childhood innocence, has largely been ignored.

The concept of postmemory as advanced by Marianne Hirsch is important to grasp the importance of Dulce Maria Cardoso’s writing – from the beginning – towards a working out of past trauma, imperial, colonial, and fascist, that stands in the way of the Portuguese assuming their postimperial condition. However,

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38 See however, Ana Cristina Mendes, ‘Remembering and fictionalizing inhospitable Europe: The experience of Portuguese retornados in Dulce Maria Cardoso’s *The Return* and Isabela Figueiredo’s *Notebook of Colonial Memories*’, which starts mapping Hirsch’s concepts to Dulce Maria Cardoso’s novel.

39 For some approaches to the concept of a postimperial Europe see Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London: Routledge, 2004) and Paulo de Medeiros, ‘Post-Imperial Europe. First Definitions’ in *(Post-) Colonialism Across Europe: Transcultural History*.
Dulce Maria Cardoso does not simply deploy postmemory as it has been usually understood, flowing primarily from the transmission of memories linked, directly, or indirectly, with the Holocaust. Rather, Dulce Maria Cardoso’s writing adapts, transforms, and further deepens the concept of postmemory, which thus acquires what one could designate as a multi-directional valance, to borrow Michael Rothberg’s notion and follow on his call to reject the idea that cultural memory would be a kind of zero-sum game.\(^{40}\) In Eliete furthermore, what is at stake is not so much the transmission of memory, directly or indirectly, across the generations, but rather its absence, the silence that can be as devastating because it precludes not only identification but also and always, from the very beginning, falsifies and betrays it. As we are told in no uncertain terms, though in reference to Eliete’s first extramarital experience, itself a kind of point of no return, but equally applicable to postmemory: ‘Sabia que o gatilho tinha sido premido há muito, que a máquina da traição era uma máquina pesada de gatilho ligeiro. Posta em funcionamento, nada nem ninguém a travava. Por ser uma máquina pesada, demora muito tempo desde que o gatilho fora premido até os efeitos se produzirem, até ao impacto’ [She knew very well that the trigger had been pressed long ago, that the treason machine was a heavy machine with a light trigger. Once activated, nothing and no one could stop it. As it is a heavy machine it takes a long time from the moment the trigger has been pressed until the effects become known, until impact is made].\(^{41}\)

Very much in keeping with the novel’s play with absence and presence, that violence is always there, again, at the very core, yet almost invisible. That applies in like measure to racial violence. Only glimpsed in fleeting moments it is always lurking underneath the veneer and can even cut across memory’s loss. As the grandmother gradually retreats into a world of her own, in her scrambling of past and present, she lets us glimpse how that violence endures, the better disguised in

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\(^{40}\) Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). The direct application of the concept of postmemory to the colonial experience is still in the process of developing. Work being carried out by the team working on the Project MEMOIRS – Children of Empires and European Postmemories, led by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro and housed at the Centro de Estudos Sociais at the University of Coimbra has been assuming a significant role: [https://memoirs.ces.uc.pt](https://memoirs.ces.uc.pt). In this regard see also the recent article by António Sousa Ribeiro and Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, ‘A Past that Will Not Go Away. The Colonial War in Portuguese Postmemory’, *Lusotopie* 17 (2018), pp. 277-300.

\(^{41}\) Cardoso, p. 214.
forms of familiarity or belonging, the crueler it is. The scene with the family watching the final match in the 2016 UEFA championship, extends leisurely over all of Chapter 5 – at the very heart of the narrative – and it reveals so much of the relations between the different people that, in a sense, almost surpasses the final disclosure of Salazar’s presumed paternity. The hero of the game was Eder, born in Bissau, and a Portuguese citizen since 2012. For it was Eder, the substitute player, who enabled Portugal to win against France, to finally stop being ‘um país pequeno’ [a small nation]. As Milena, Eliete’s successful friend, makes clear, in a double-entendre that discloses much more about Portugal’s relation to Africa than the banal allusion to her current lover, ‘Os Africanos não falham, disse a Milena, piscando-me o olho’ [The Africans never miss, said Milena, with a wink of the eye for me]. However, it is the grandmother’s observation, in her false memory, that cuts deeper: ‘Também gosto muito dele, disse a avó, olhando para o Eder a ser cumprimentado pelos colegas, tratava-me muito bem do jardim, ia sempre às quartas-feiras’ [I also like him very much, grandmother said, looking at Eder while his teammates greeted him, he took very good care of my garden, was always there on Wednesdays]. As Adorno famously noted in his *Minima Moralia*, ‘Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen’ [Wrong life cannot be lived rightly]. If Eliete is a ruthless indictment of the falseness of current life in Portugal as much as it is a form of witnessing, remembering, and insuring that future generations may have an anchor to make sense of who they are and where they come from, it is not without hope. On the contrary, as we see Eliete gradually immerse herself more and more in the machine we also see her detaching herself from it, becoming at first an observer – as when she, more than watching that soccer match, watches the others watching it, in her impossibility to ‘me sentir pertença do que quer que fosse ser português’ [feel any belonging in any form or shape of being Portuguese]. Then, as her identity becomes more and more shattered, she actually starts reclaiming it back as a form of resistance to all the lies; a resistance that actually had already been heralded at the very beginning of the narrative: ‘Eu sou eu e o Salazar que se foda’ [I am I and Salazar can go fuck himself].’ It is that

42 Cardoso, p. 157.
43 Cardoso, p. 155.
44 Cardoso, p. 155.
45 Cardoso, p. 154.
resistance and that hope for another future that makes the reader join the author in the final exhortation: 'Não te vais apagar agora, pois não, Eliete?' [You are not going to extinguish yourself now, are you Eliete?].