

Wounded Cities, Fragmented Selves: Walking, Melancholia and the Interwar Novel. Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Bontempelli's *La vita operosa*

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Abstract: This article looks at the connection between walking, trauma and self-development in two novels of the interwar years from Italian and English literature, namely Massimo Bontempelli's *La vita operosa* (*Productive Life*, 1921) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Identity processes and urban space have long been recognised as central to these novels, yet the effects of the war on the characters' consciousness have received far less critical attention. While *Mrs Dalloway* is a highly experimental work set in London on a single day of June 1923 and centred on the actions and thoughts of the eponymous character, the bourgeois middle-aged Clarissa, Bontempelli's (micro) novel is an autobiography recounting the adventures of a young idler in Milan in 1919. However, these novels share similarities in the depiction of two ex-soldiers – the narrator and protagonist of *La vita operosa* and the shell-shocked Septimus Warren-Smith, Clarissa's double – wandering through the city. Placing particular emphasis on the modernist chronotope, i.e. the intersection of inner and outer time-space in modernist fiction, I will examine how memories of the war, as well as (day)dreams, interweave with the characters' perception, affecting their city experience. Drawing on the conceptual framework of melancholia, I will link this specifically modern condition to the experience of the fragmented self in the metropolis. I will thus show that, in these novels, walking in the city represents a way of coming to terms with the trauma of the war, and overcoming the state of shock and paralysis resulting from it.

Keywords: *modernism, melancholia, war, city, subjectivity*

Introduction

Melancholia has a history that spans centuries: from the humoral theories of ancient Greece through the Christian concept of a sinful state of "acedia" to its revival in the Renaissance by the hands of Marsilio Ficino, and then in the Romanticism, when melancholia was exalted as a mode of intensified reflection – the temperament proper to thinkers and philosophers. While, at any given time, different, contradictory theories of melancholia co-existed, most descriptions oscillate between two poles: either melancholia is regarded as an illness, an affective experience which entails fear or despondency, or as a "normal abnormality," a depressive mood proper to the person "born under Saturn," which also resulted in a particular temperament. The latter, "temperamental melancholia," which Aristotle linked in his *Problems* to men of

extraordinary ability, was thought to prompt capacities for creation and great achievement, and thus, connected to “the man of genius”.¹

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there was a paradigm shift in the conception of melancholia, with the emergence of psychoanalysis and the parallel development of the modern city. Differently than in the past, melancholia came to be seen as inextricably related to the experience of loss, namely in the way of an emotional attachment to something or someone lost, as formulated in Freud’s 1917 essay *Mourning and Melancholia*. It was, however, Walter Benjamin who mostly saw melancholia as a historically contingent condition, specifically related to the experience of modernity, a psychic consequence occasioned by the emergence of high capitalist society. Notably, Benjamin singled out Baudelaire as the first modernist “urban melancholic,” recognising that, mostly in his splenetic poetry/spleen poems, melancholia asserts its value in that it grants access to the historical origins of subjective suffering and thus, to the logic of historicity itself. In order to defend himself from the shock of modern city life, Baudelaire resorts to the realm of personal memory, which, filtered through his isolating urban experience, results in “a split structure of experience.” However, this fractured mode of experience, Benjamin argues, is far from personal, but rather, it is the “melancholic scar” left on the individual by high capitalist modernity (Benjamin, *The Paris of the Second Empire*: 4, 3-92 and 95-98. Cited in Bahun, *Modernism and Melancholia*: 34).

If, as Julia Kristeva would have it, melancholia asserts itself in times of crisis (see Kristeva, *Black Sun*: 8), the examination of this condition and its unfolding in the urban environment of the post-war years – a period of deep crisis and social upheaval – provides a fruitful contribution to this field of study.

This essay investigates the connection between the experience of war and identity formation in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and Massimo Bontempelli’s *La vita operosa* (*Productive Life*, 1920), two novels whose similarities have been largely overlooked. While identity processes and urban space have been identified as key elements to both narratives, the effects of the war on the subject’s consciousness have received far less critical attention. My analysis highlights how the experience of war shapes the perceptions of the two main characters, affecting their path in the post-war urban reality. Drawing on the conceptual framework of melancholia, I will then try to demonstrate that walking through the city is a way of coming to terms with the experience of the war, thus developing a freer, fuller self.

Mrs Dalloway

Mrs Dalloway has long entered the canon of high-modernist fiction, yet only a few studies have recognised it as a war novel.² Indeed, the war enters the narration on many levels, most evidently in the characterisation of Septimus Warren Smith, the shell-shocked veteran whose trauma is widely depicted in a climatic trajectory which leads to his suicide.

While the thematisation of the double in the novel has been widely acknowledged, critics tend to read the couple Clarissa/Septimus mainly under the dichotomy of sanity/insanity, seeing in the former soldier's final act a surrender to depression and inability to (re)act, as opposed to Clarissa's choice of living.³ In her enlightening study, Christine Froula describes *Mrs Dalloway* as a war elegy, yet she mainly focuses on Clarissa as the central elegiac consciousness and on the transposition of certain generic conventions to feminine registers (*Mrs Dalloway's Postwar Elegy*: 87-126). Although she considers Septimus as an elegiac consciousness too, she interprets his ultimate suicide only in negative terms, as the interruption of "the elegiac progress toward life and the future" (113). Focusing on Septimus' states of mind and perceptions I will argue, instead, that his path is an attempt to make sense of the war and his own existence, thus offering a new, more positive interpretation of the novel's ending. In the same vein, I highlight Bontempelli's irony as the marker of the melancholic experience of the modernist fragmented self,⁴ showing its critical function in an aim to challenge the view of *La vita operosa* as a "miserably failed attempt of an integration [into society]" (Bontempelli, *Opere scelte*: xxii).

My reading of these two novels is informed by Sanja Bahun's understanding of melancholia as a socio-symbolic emblem of modern times, namely "both a reaction to and the very form of modernists' interaction with the maelstrom of modern life" (Bahun, *Modernism and Melancholia*: 3). Bahun maintains that, like modernism, melancholia is a rather ambiguous phenomenon that can be understood as an affect and an affective disorder, a type of behaviour (a mood comparable to Baudelaire's *spleen*), or, as philosophers have described it, a mysterious condition that "triggers the power of imagination and cognition" (3). Similarly, in psychiatric literature, melancholia appears as a variegated and vague cluster of illnesses, ranging from "bipolar depression" to "complicated grief" (4). Contending with the tendency in literary scholarship to consider modernism as an "elusive melancholic Weltanschauung" whose only clear feature is the rejection of social engagement, Bahun proposes a view of melancholia as not simply "an escapist frame of mind", but as "dual phenomenon", a discourse that interprets and produces experiential reality as well as a distinct symptom determined by its historical moment – hence her

speaking of “historical melancholia” (4). Significantly, Bahun draws a crucial parallel between modernism and melancholia: she sees the psychic features that dominate the clinical picture of melancholia – namely, the struggle of ambivalence, experience of dislocation and feelings of fragmentation in the face of cognitively inaccessible loss – as marker-sentiments which find expression in modernist texts (5). Moreover, she also highlights as melancholic symptoms self-reflexivity, epistemological and affective insecurity, and the problematic relation to the logocentric process – features which are intrinsic to modernism and to which I will devote particular attention.

Bahun’s interpretation of melancholia as a historically contingent mood-bending is significant as it allows me to illuminate the experience of the two ex-soldiers protagonists of Woolf’s and Bontempelli’s novels in the post-war reality of London and Milan respectively. It is likewise significant that Bahun points to a fundamental shift in the perception of melancholia in a specific moment in time, namely the emergence of psychoanalysis, considered as a science discourse “that is at the same time a product and a symptom of cultural modernism” (4). Her psychological account is thus grounded on Freud’s reconceptualisation of melancholia, a subject he addressed for the first time during the First World War, notably in his seminal paper, *Mourning and Melancholia* (1915-17). Rather than following suit of the Freudian and common understanding of melancholia as opposite to mourning, Bahun identifies a modern inability to mourn, labelled “countermourning,” which she connects to the social and political context since the second half of the nineteenth century, and in particular to the devastating psychological impact of the two world wars. This countermourning, which belongs to the framework of melancholia, is not simply anti-mourning, but a mourning that refuses to mourn, thus questioning the “healing” aspects of mourning as a specific, culturally constructed type of behaviour, thereby working against those attitudes proper to it, such as “acceptance” and “resignation” (19). In what follows, I examine the melancholic condition and its role in the developmental trajectory of Septimus Warren Smith, who, showing the symptoms common to war neurosis,⁵ struggles to preserve himself in the harsh reality of post-war London.

As Bahun points out, the condition of melancholia is premised on the absence of an object that is symptomatically felt as present (*Modernism and Melancholia*: 55). On his first appearance in the novel, it is evident that Septimus’ war experience shapes his sense of reality, as he refuses to detach himself from the lost object: in this case, his friend, Evans, whose death he witnessed in the trenches. When a mysterious motor car passes through Bond Street, arousing everyone’s curiosity, Septimus senses “some horror”, feeling the earth

quivering and questioning the purpose of his being “rooted to the pavement” while he witnesses the world bursting into flames (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*: 16).⁶

Freud hypothesised that melancholic symptoms were caused by the ambivalence of feelings and repression in the wake of loss (*Freud to Fliess*: 250), and entailed the simultaneous exaltation and mistrust of language. This is expressed in the novel by Septimus’ contrasting feelings and altered perception of the reality around him, with an emphasis on the creative expressiveness of language. At particular turning points in the narration, when the other characters’ attention converges on a specific event, like the aforementioned motor car or the aeroplane soaring above Regent’s Park, Septimus’ extraordinary sense of perception really comes to the fore. While everyone tries to read the white smoked letters left hanging in the sky by the plane, Septimus interprets them as signs sent to him in a language he is not “yet” able to understand, and feels bestowed with “unimaginable beauty” (*MD*: 23). However, this moment of exaltation leaves space immediately afterwards, to a deadly scenery which causes his desire to close his eyes and “see no more” (24). Believing the trees to be alive, he feels their leaves connected to his own body and waves up and down like the elms – notably resonant with helmets – while sparrows draw jagged fountains and the cry of a child makes him foresee “the birth of a new religion” (24).

Septimus finds himself living in a sort of limbo, convinced to be the Lord “taken from life to death” (27), that of his soul brought about by the war, and initially refuses to accomplish his mission and die once and forever for his sins and those of humanity. Hence, while hearing the sparrow singing a Greek elegy assuring that “there is no death”, he sees Evans again beyond the river where the dead walk, and can even touch him if he stretches his hand (26). Septimus’ struggles of ambivalence towards reality and his destiny are reflected in his oscillation between nihilistic despair – the intention of killing himself out of human cruelty – and the inability to let life go with all its “exquisite beauty” (23). However, his initial reluctance leaves gradually space to the acceptance of his destiny, foreseen in the vision of his afterlife, when he is finally drawn to the “shores of life,” in what seems like an ascent to heaven with the sun growing hotter and the cries getting louder, signalling something “tremendous” is about to happen (75).

Freud highlights that, although it entails inhibition of the ability to verbalise, melancholia is characterised by “insistent communicativeness”, that is the melancholic’s unrelenting attempt to exteriorise the affect in language (*Mourning and Melancholia*: 247). Septimus, who believes to “carr[y] in him the greatest message in the word” (*MD*: 91) tries to speak it out, as when he stares

at the sky muttering and clasping his hands, painfully striving to disclose to the world his “profound truths” (74).

Initially, Septimus seems unable to depart from Evans, but, with the proceeding narration, his melancholia develops into countermourning as his pre-war, freer ego becomes the lost object so that subject and object are no longer psychologically divided. The role of language and communication is paramount in the characters’ emotional development. Significantly, Bahun recognises a continuity between melancholia and sublimatory mourning rites such as writing (*Modernism and Melancholia*: 6). As Septimus writes his revelations on the back of envelopes, so he tries to communicate his message via flaming poems and drawings about war and Shakespeare where he outpours his excitement only to encounter his wife’s lack of understanding and their maid’s scorn (*MD*: 154).

While Septimus hallucinates Evans and sees “all the other crimes” raising their heads and sneering over the rail of his bed (99), the narration makes it clear that the war, where he distinguished himself, has taught him to repress his emotions, so that when his friend died, “he could not feel” anything (95). In the war he had thus learned to stiffen life’s “irreticencies” into a corpse of discipline, like that of the weedy boys marching with a thudding sound up Whitehall with stiff arms and a marble stare (56). It is in the trenches that Septimus developed “manliness” (94),⁷ with the war representing a breaking point between his life of the self-educated boy who came to London from a small town in Gloucestershire with some literary ambitions, and his adult life of a man who “had gone through the whole show: friendship, European War, death...” (95). Significantly, it is in Milan, soon after Evans’ death, that Septimus decides to marry a young woman, Lucrezia, although he knows he does not love her, thus fully accomplishing his manly duties.

Bahun traces Freud’s redefinition of melancholia back to the religious psychology of Søren Kierkegaard, whereby, for both thinkers, melancholia is at once a paradigmatic condition and the performance of a new subjecthood. What is relevant here is that Kierkegaard considers melancholia as a progressive move, an “upbuilding stage” leading to “emotional, intellectual and spiritual maturity” (*The Sickness unto Death*: 78 and 110). This maturity, he continues, manifests itself as an individual ability to make a responsible existential choice at the decisive moment in which personal history and eternity intersect. Septimus’ existential trajectory is exemplary of this as, by killing himself, he does not only assert his freedom from society’s norms, but he also accepts that he must take charge of his destiny for the sake of humankind. Indeed, the insistence on communication is paralleled in the novel with the revelation of

Septimus' messianic mission of renewing society, already hinted in his "fantastic Christian name" (*MD*: 92). Hence, Septimus' exalted conception of himself and his exceptional perception of reality does not only reflect the compulsive self-reflexivity proper to melancholic ailment, but also reveals the critical social function identified by Bahun as inherent to this condition (*Modernism and Melancholia*: 32).

It is worth noticing that Christian and war imagery also merge in the dream of Peter Walsh,⁸ Clarissa's ex-lover just returned from India, that of the solitary traveller, "the disturber of ferns" who seeks solace and relief in a womanised natural landscape (*MD*: 62). His vision of the woman "made of sky and branches," (62) risen from the "troubled sea" to shower down compassion and absolution is soon replaced by the old lady who waits in the village with her shaded eyes for the return of her "lost son" (63) – a scene which clearly recalls the famous parable of the Prodigal Son. The "giant figure" the traveller sees at the end of his ride evokes God; the elderly woman who comes to the door with her white apron and hands raised seems to embody the forgiving parent of the biblical story. The conflation of traveller and lost son is significantly interspersed with war imagery as the old woman who looks at "a rider destroyed" is revealed to be "the mother whose sons have been killed in the battles of the world" (63). Peter's commentary on his dream is also (fore)telling: "the death of the soul" (64). Not only is Septimus one of the souls lost to the war, but he also fears his "eternal loneliness" (27) and, significantly, in his violent visions of melted flesh, he conceives of an old woman's head in the middle of a fern (72).

It becomes clear then that Septimus is less able to let go of Evans than his true, freer self. That is why his final suicide can be interpreted, in the words of Clarissa, as an act of defiance, the preservation of beauty and one's truth, which she has sacrificed in the face of societal conventions.⁹ While it is unsure whether Septimus' act of communication is fruitful, his message has definitely reached her: "a thing there was that mattered" – she muses after hearing that he has killed himself – "this he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate" (202). Feeling her body in flames, Clarissa can see Septimus jumping out of the window and admires him for the fact that "he had flunged it away" (202), whereas the only thing she has been able to throw is a shilling in the Serpentine. Remembering the day when, coming down in a white dress she thought of taking her life, aware that dying would mean "to be most happy," she makes sense of Septimus' act. It is indeed the awareness that he had plunged "holding his treasure", the precious thing "let drop every day in chatter, lies and corruption," which Clarissa ends up losing due to her

ambitions and trifles, that allows her to keep on with the party and her life more serenely (202).

Hence, the role played by society and its conventions is paramount not only for Septimus, but also for Clarissa's melancholic sense of self. The problem of self-development (and its limits) in the face of an irrational, post-war world, appears as strictly connected to the use of irony in both Woolf's and Bontempelli's narrative technique, as I will show in the following part.

La vita operosa

La vita operosa is quite different in form and style from Woolf's lyrical work, as it is written in the first person and deal more openly with the flaws of post-war reconstruction, yet both texts share the ironical attitude towards society's values and mores. The sections which form the "adventures" of *La vita operosa* depict the various attempts of a veteran just returned in Milan to find his place in post-war Italian society, ruthlessly detected in its trivial and irrational aspects.

While the importance of the city for the character's developmental path has been recognised, the effects of the war on his perceptions of the urban reality have attracted less critical reflection.¹⁰ This is even more surprising considering that, from the onset, the character's condition of "spaesamento" (disorientation) is connected to his experience as a soldier, as he laments that the Officer Training School he attended has not taught him to orientate in the "aperta campagna", the open field of Milan, when you have neither a compass nor a watch or stars and sun to help you (Bontempelli, *La vita operosa*: 151).¹¹ The adventures of the "I" – called Massimo like the author – thus unfold in a city where, in the first instance, he needs to find his way ("bisogna prima orientarsi", 153) – not an easy task as Milan is presented as the field of "the harshest battles in life" (151). Significantly, while the ex-soldier is pervaded by "estasi" (ecstasy, which happens to be the title of the second section: 151), this exalted condition is premised on the rediscovery of the beauty and the everyday after the experience of war, which however does not hinder a sensation of void deriving from la "malsana tendenza verso l'infinità", (the unhealthy tendency towards infinity, 150) which affects humankind. While he labels "nostalgia" the feeling the soldier had for the earthly goods he sees everywhere around him in the city, like the bar with the colourful bottles of liquors, the crystal of the showcases and charming women getting on buses and trams, his present condition can actually be subsumed to melancholia. Not incidentally, following Benjamin, Bahun identifies as the first urban melancholics Charles Baudelaire, whose *spleen* – an ambivalent psychological

condition oscillating between anguish and ecstasy – has been associated with Bontempelli's "passeggiate urbane" (city walks, see De Villi, *Allegorie del moderno*). This aspect is also present in Woolf's novel: Clarissa enjoys walking in London and loves what she sees around her "in this moment of June," yet, at the same time, she feels that "in people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge" death lurks (*MD*: 4). Although "the war was over," it has left an indelible mark on people's lives, so that amidst the triumphs of British civilisation, Clarissa cannot whisk away the thought that it is "very, very dangerous to live even one day" (9). In this sense, the recourse to literature, here to Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, seems to have a sublimatory mourning function as Clarissa repeats more times to herself throughout the narration the first two lines from a funeral dirge *Fear no more (the heat o' the sun)*, the same words uttered by Septimus before his final act (153).

Although Bontempelli's text engages with more trivial aspects of reality, and the hero's path is not charged with the Christian symbology present in Woolf, military and religious imagery merge with the usual irony in that the treatise of topography studied at military school, with its dialogic structures, is compared to the "catechismo", the holy text of Christian doctrine. Moreover, the character's difficulty in gaining a sense of orientation is made more explicit as the city reveals its nature of "battlefield of life" when the sky is covered, and the air envelops everything with its grey veil (*VO*: 152). Also here, although less overtly than in Woolf, the experience of the trenches lurks in the protagonist's perception of the urban landscape. Women attract him with their eyes "di carbone e luce" ("made of coal and light", 151), and from time to time the streets are lit by "lunghi bagliori folgoranti" ("prolonged dazzling glows") as aeroplanes fly above the city (152).

While Woolf's narration is often dreamlike in its famously fragmented yet flowing style, reflecting the characters' thoughts in a stream of consciousness, Bontempelli's novel *performs* melancholia: first, through the psychic tripartition of the self into the author, narrator and protagonist; then, in the division of the chapters into smaller units, which articulates the modern subject's uprootedness in the urban context and the sensation of void derived from the war. Esther Sánchez-Pardo has made the significant case that melancholia influenced the modernist heterogenisation of forms such as the novel, biography and autobiography (*Cultures of the Death Drive*: 213-214), which – in the case of Bontempelli's text – borders on autofiction.¹²

Yet the strategies of split embodiment employed in the micronovels which compose *La vita operosa* are not only evident on the level of textual performance, but also in the protagonist's tragicomic duplication and constant dialogue, or

better an affect-ridden interior monologue, with his “Dàimone” (daimon). The latter is indeed the most evident sign of the protagonist’s melancholic psyche, given that, as Bahun notes, fragmentation and the problematic relationship to the logocentric processes, embodied here by his “loico” (logic) double, are among the key features of the melancholic condition.

However, it must not be overlooked that the elusive and intangible nature of identity preoccupies Woolf’s novel as well, finding expression not only in Septimus’ compulsive/pathological self-reflexivity, but also in Clarissa’s musings and struggles on self-definition. Walking in the crowded streets of London on an ordinary day of June, she reflects on the impossibility to capture true identity – she would not say of anyone in the world, including the people she knows best, and even herself that “I am this, I am that” (*MD*: 8-9). Later at home, looking at her face in the mirror she confesses that her stable self – “pointed, dartlike, definite” – is but only the result of a strong effort to put all her diverse, incompatible selves together to be always only and the same Mrs Clarissa Dalloway who is hosting a party that very night (40).

Another aspect of both novels deserving attention here is irony, which I consider not only as an expression of the melancholic experience of the fragmented self, as Bahun would have it (*Modernism and Melancholia*: 33), but, as an attempt to give order and meaning, and to create a space for oneself, in the chaos and irrational social conditions of post-war society. It is undeniable that each of Bontempelli’s ludic embodiments, reinforced by ironic distancing, contributes to giving a melancholic testimony of his time. One episode which is exemplary of this is the chapter concerned with the gambling game, “la morra”: entering a café he used to haunt before the war, the protagonist immediately notices a different atmosphere and, strange as it may seem, is caught by a memory of the front, that of a valley, Valdirose, in between Tarnova and San Marco, crossed by a grid that reaches up to a steep slope (*VO*: 154). The apparent reason for this random correlative is made clear immediately after: in the café, which used to be known as an elegant venue, wreathed by clouds of smoke and the sound of violins, a group of ladies and gentlemen play the game of “morra,” which a sergeant taught him in the trenches. Subsequently, the tricks of the game are explained via military jargon, with the player progressing of a “grado,” (degree), as he gains more skills up until the third, when he will be able to guess the adversary’s move and beat him (155). This analogy between war and game is a way to reflect on the lack of purpose of the war, which has only taught those who took part in it how to play and cheat. Moreover, the law of chance dominates both fields, reinforcing the sense of “smarrimento” (loss, confusion) felt by the protagonist. Feeling “più che mai senza bussola” (“totally

bewildered", 155), after having contemplated for a while the new society "nata dal lavoro moderno e dalla vittoria" ("born from modern work and victory", 156), he then resolves to try and make money, as befits a productive city like Milan.

While Woolf's humorous sensibilities – as well as her intention to "criticize the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense"¹³ in the novel – are well-known, the role of irony and humour as a coping device for a negotiation of the social system in the cruel post-war world has received little critical attention. As Lisa Colletta has aptly pointed out, what links Clarissa and Septimus is the opposite reaction to the constraints placed on them by an imperial, patriarchal society that does not allow any deviation from the imposed pattern of class and gender conformity (*Criticizing the Social System*: 39). However, while Septimus reacts to society's limits "insanely" due to his direct experience of war, Clarissa's response is "sane" in that she partakes in societal customs, as her hosting the party shows, yet remains ironically distanced from them (40). In Woolf, there is also the narrator's ironic gaze, which is directed at society's pretensions and hypocrisy, personified by the party guests such as lady Bruton and mostly by the doctor Sir William Bradshaw and his wife, whom Clarissa openly dislikes. The novel thus seems to hint at one possible way of negotiating the social world without being submitted to it, and irony is presented as the coping mechanism which allows this negotiation. If Woolf's satire, however, tends to dark comedy as much as twentieth-century social satire, as Lisa Colletta notices, this is not only because humour is set against the backdrop of madness, death and the effects of war, but also because – unlike comedy – it works against the reconciliation between individual and society, as testified by Septimus' suicide and Clarissa's isolation from her social world (48). Significantly, the final image of Clarissa that the reader is left with is that of her standing alone at the window, reflecting on Septimus' death while staring at the simple old lady going to bed in the house opposite; she eventually must call on herself once again to "assemble" and get back to the party (*MD*: 204).

This dark brand of humour and the unsettling lack of belief in the rational progress of history is all the more apparent in Bontempelli's text, particularly in the narrator's ironic stance/attitude towards the customs and values of post-war society as well as in the narrative's refusal of any final reconciliation between self and society.

As Bahun notes, melancholia may develop not only around the loss of an actual individual, but also of a social abstraction such as "fatherland" and "liberty" (*Modernism and Melancholia*: 26). What Bontempelli's protagonist

seems to mourn are the values and ideals of the pre-war time, thus refusing to dispel “le lettere,” the philosophical knowledge which, in capitalist post-war society, has surrendered to material goods and advertising. While he is intent on examining the advancement of demobilisation, he happens to meet a former lieutenant who, having dismissed his plans of working as an engineer for the railways, persuades the protagonist to leave behind his “velleità letterarie” (literary ambitions, *VO*: 168), and start working in advertising like him. Tellingly, when he starts “selling his ideas,” looking from his window at the lively streets above, he is caught by a strange feeling he recognises as melancholia, which he ironically dismisses as not suited to the spirit of the new times: “non entra nello spirito dei tempi nuovi” (175).

In Bontempelli’s text, the inability to mourn is exposed as a societal condition, as it appears most clearly in the section carrying the biblical title “nuova incarnazione del verbo” (“The New Incarnation of the Word”, 156). While in *Mrs Dalloway* Septimus could read a divine message in the letters soared in the sky on the trail of the plane, here, “il Verbo” (The Word) has found its embodiment in the signs of modernity: the placards with the ode to the present time, OGGI (TODAY) written in capital letters are placed everywhere and should help one orientate oneself (157). In spite of the daimon’s caution to avoid historical diagnosis, the protagonist muses that the Volontà di Vivere (Will to Living) which seems to possess all city dwellers, is borne out of the “trincee verminose” (wormy trenches, 156). The protagonist’s tendency to “diagnosis” marks the compulsive examination of verbal and representational tools which, again, is proper to the melancholic condition. Indeed, behind the apparent *jouissance* and admiration he feels for all those men and women having gone through the war, like in Woolf, a gloomier thought takes him, namely that this lust for life comes from the resignation to death, the constant reminder of those “cinquecentomila ròsi dai vermi,” the soldiers’ verminous corpses in the plains of Piave and Carso (158). The loss of values and ideals in the post-war world causes a melancholic awareness in the narrator: he realizes that, in the temple of the new God OGGI (TODAY, 157), there are neither ideals nor cardinal points, and he thus questions, similarly to Septimus, the meaning of the world. However, far from being taken by nihilistic despair, he decides to take advantage in the present of what he learned at the “scuola di artiglieria,” the military school, namely that each has to do what they can to get along (159). Hence, he guides his Dàimone from the dark to the light of the streets to enjoy that sunny day of January in productive Milan.

While, as Bahun notes, the primary role of mourning is to reconcile the mourner with society (*Modernism and Melancholia*: 60), I stress that

countermourning reconciles the subject with oneself, as shown by Septimus' final act of defiance. In the case of Bontempelli's texts, the protagonist's progressive move manifests itself in his repeated choice not to conform to socially accepted behaviours. For instance, when he resigns from his first job in advertising after having been caught by the feeling of "incomprehensible melancholia" at the sight of the life and hustle and bustle on the streets outside his window (VO: 175). He thus leaves an ironic note to his boss in which he pleads his cause of "letterato," an educated man who must resign for reasons of "forza maggiore," and thus, apparently, a victim to forces beyond his own control (176).

The recourse to a "surreal" dimension has been recognised as one of the key features of Bontempelli's work,¹⁴ yet its relationship to the character's split melancholic consciousness, as well as its critical social function, has been overlooked. Significantly, in his *Stanzas*, Giorgio Agamben identifies as part of the "melancholic project" the entering/entrance "into relation with unreality and with the unappropriable as such" in order to "appropriate the real and the positive" (xix). The chapter on "via Belloveso" brings this to the fore; the experience of war is filtered through the myth and is used to lay claim to the power of creation. Particularly in the section called "fatale andare" (fatal going, VO: 195), the protagonist follows a devilish man with "due occhi quasi bianchi spiritati" (spirited white eyes, 193) he met on a tram coach, which slowly leaving famous squares and hit roads behind, leads them into the "unknown". While the coach seems to be driven by "occulte cagioni" (secret forces, 196), the landscape changes into a succession of dark walls and plagued paving broken by filthy buildings. As the carriage proceeds in its deadly course, the protagonist feels his soul "fasciarsi di lenta malinconia," swathing slowly in melancholia, and his body fading among the "spiriti crepuscolari," the twilight spirits which do not abandon him until he sees again the light and hears "sonorità umane" (human sound, 196). While the peculiar man seems to vanish once they reach city ground, the protagonist sees the camp of the Gauls of Belloveso, the founder of Milan standing in place of the Dom square, and is haunted for days by violent visions of flames and human sacrifices to the bloody warrior God "Hesus" (199). As the protagonist ironically admits, if he had still been a writer, he would have written a tragedy on Belloveso; but now he can only mourn the forgotten Belloveso as suited to the times, namely by dedicating the most modern street of the city to him. Hence, he plans on creating "via Belloveso" from scratch, a street full of skyscrapers ("tutta di grattacieli, di grandi grattacieli", 200) made of reinforced concrete, a work which seems to calm the soul, not only that of Belloveso but also his own, as he intends to settle in the street, at number 18 (203). Significantly, the chosen place

for this creation resembles a battlefield: a vast soaked plane trespassing into grey infinity, punctuated by iron poles and low bare trees (205). However, as the “Dàimone”, who had been absent during the protagonist’s creative act, turns up again the few houses on the street start to vacillate and then disappear, while the plain, covered by icy white lights, is swallowed by the ground and the protagonist is left “aggranchito,” numb, in the midst of the fog surrounding the austere Milan (207).

It is worth noticing that the language of myth and religion is used parodically throughout the narration, as when the famous café Campari – popular for businesses – is compared to a Church with its altar and waiters bringing around their offers as priests who testify of the new religion born out of the influence of the faraway war (“dall’influsso della guerra lontana”, 247). In the same vein, the harsh living conditions in the aftermath of the war are voiced by the strange guests of the “cenacolo platonico” (platonic cenacle) of Irene, the peculiar landlady who shares her flat with her two husbands. At her circle, if someone complains about the housing crisis or the price increase occasioned by the war and its aftermath, now 15 months away, they must pay two bottles of wine as penance (234-242). Hence, although less overtly than in Woolf, the war is present in the narration through the recurrent time indicators¹⁵ and the references to its effects on the protagonist’s condition; with the usual irony he identifies the cause of his headache in that, one month earlier, he had left the stability/stillness of military life for the whirl of the metropolis “er[a] tornato dalla quadrupedante e arcadica vita militare al cerebros turbine della metropoli” (back from the quadrupedal arcadian military life to the cerebral whirl of the metropolis, 247).

If the death drive dominates *La vita intensa* (the tales to which *La vita operosa* is clearly connected, with the protagonist eventually killing himself to be reborn and then married), the destructive potential of melancholia is overcome here and, with typical irony, the protagonist reconciles with his own self. In the final section, titled “idillio” (“idyll”, 285) – which interestingly recalls the “arcadica” (arcadian) used earlier to define military life – he misses the appointment with an important politician, the “Eccellenza,” whose contact would have likely gained him a job. Indeed, as he states, while his effort on this occasion would not add anything to his own story, let alone contribute to the History of the world, he holds true to himself as he has realised that he is not meant for “collocar[si]... esemplarmente nel mondo sociale” (to exemplarily find his own place in society, 277). Hence, after having reconnected with his proud Dàimone, with whom he has now become one thing, indissolubly, he can keep on staying in bed and enjoy some deserved sleep, “[il] sonno dell’uomo giusto” (285).

Conclusions

In this essay, I have examined how the experience of war and feelings in the wake of loss affects the perceptions of post-war urban reality of the main characters of Bontempelli's and Woolf's novels, which share the modernist preoccupation with self-knowledge and the difficult negotiation of the social system in the face of madness, death and the irrational conditions occasioned by the war. While, for both Clarissa Dalloway and the narrator of *La vita operosa*, thoughts of death are replaced by the reality of social ritual and customs, the humorous perspective of both novels is darkly subversive as it asserts the arbitrariness of all social constructions that limit the life of human beings.

Focusing on the protagonists' melancholic condition in these works, I have relied on Bahun's concept of countermourning and on the consideration of melancholia as a progressive movement of the psyche, which rests on Freud's psychology and Kierkegaard's philosophy. This reconsideration of melancholia not only as a passive state of contemplation and the marker of an exceptional condition which allows a surplus of vision and cognition, but as the very expression of modern subjectivity has allowed me to uncover its neglected value as a coping mechanism through which one may participate in the world; this new perspective on melancholia also enables a reconsideration of the social and historical origins of one's suffering, and thus, of our subjective lives.

Finally, highlighting the critical function of countermourning and its ability to reconcile the melancholic with oneself, I have offered an alternative reading of the two novels and their endings, challenging their reductive view in terms of deviant subjectivities or simply as failed attempts of integration into society.

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- ¹ For a historical account of melancholia since Hippocrates' understanding of *melaina-kole* to (post) modern theories of melancholy, see e.g. Flatley (*Affective Mapping*) and Radden (ed.) (*The Nature of Melancholy*).
 - ² For an examination of the influence of the world war in a novel that "does not seem to focus on War," see Lilienfeld ("*Success in Circuit Lies*": 113-133). On war neurosis and its influence on Woolf's poetics, see also Levenback (*Virginia Woolf and Returning Soldiers*: 71-88).
 - ³ There are several studies of *Mrs Dalloway*, which also focus on the relationship between Clarissa and Septimus. See e.g. Hawthorn (*Virginia Woolf's "Mrs Dalloway"*); Bloom (ed.) (*Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway*); Acheson, (ed.) (*Virginia Woolf*); and Whitworth (*Virginia Woolf*).
 - ⁴ On the modernist features of Bontempelli's work, with particular reference to *La vita intensa* and *La vita operosa* see Gallo (*Bontempelli modernista*); and Romano Luperini's enlightening essay *Il modernismo italiano esiste* (3-12).
 - ⁵ I am not using the term "shell-shock", as it was from the onset rather controversial and dismissed during the final stages of the war when it was clear that explosions of shells were not to blame for the disorder, and that the term "shock" was ill-chosen too as in most cases the breakdown was softer and manifested itself more gradually.
 - ⁶ All further references to this text will appear in-text as *MD*.
 - ⁷ In her study *Male Hysteria*, Elaine Showalter highlights that emotional repression was an essential aspect of the British masculine ideal, and that the atmosphere of the war was strongly homoerotic. The study is enlightening, as it draws attention to the connection between war neurosis and male social obligations. The narrative also hints at Septimus' impotence and (latent) homosexuality: although his wife wants children and they have been together for five years their marriage is sterile. Moreover, it is telling that, when the doctor visits Septimus, he enquires whether he has "impulses." See Bourke (*Effeminacy, Ethnicity and the End of Trauma*).
 - ⁸ Peter Walsh embodies the coercive power of (British) imperialism which also led to the War, substantiating what Robert Wohl (*The Generation of 1918*: 120) identifies as "the English myth of a lost generation," the powerful commemoration of the war dead. According to Levenfeld this myth invalidated returning soldiers for years after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles (*Virginia Woolf and Returning Soldiers*: 75).
 - ⁹ On the dilemma of expressing individuality while participating in social life and on Septimus as the necessary "death in life" in *Mrs Dalloway* see Jean Thompson's enlightening study *Virginia Woolf and the Case of Septimus Smith*.
 - ¹⁰ Cinzia Gallo points to the disorientation of the narrated self in the post-war reality of Milan, yet she interprets it reductively as the expression of the "insufficienza dell'io" (failure of the self) and his inability to take charge of his life (*Bontempelli modernista*: 4).
 - ¹¹ Further reference to this work will appear in-text as *VO*. English translations are mine. Critics tend to consider the adventures told in *La Vita Operosa* (and *La Vita Intensa* too) as self-contained narrative inserts, hence the term "micronovels".
 - ¹² For what concerns Bontempelli's mixture of autobiography, narrative text, and autofiction (as defined by Doubrovsky and Donnarumma), see Gallo (*La vita operosa di Massimo Bontempelli fra narrativa, autobiografia e "autofiction"*).
 - ¹³ Woolf (*A Writer's Diary*: 57). Cited in Colletta (*Criticizing the Social System*: 39).
 - ¹⁴ Stefano Lazzarin speaks of "torsione surreale del reale" (surreal inflection of the real). While connecting Bontempelli's *La vita intensa* and *La vita operosa* to the tradition of the nineteenth-century English adventure and detective novel (Arthur Machen and Conan Doyle), he also

recognizes the influence on the two texts of French surrealism with its tenet of the “extraordinary in the reality” (*La città avventurosa*: 87-99). Lazzarin notices that that of Bontempelli would actually be a surrealism *ante litteram* and proposes the term “protosurrealismo” (92).

- ¹⁵ As when he states: “La guerra è finita da due mesi e c’è il sole a Milano in gennaio” (“the war ended two months ago and it is a sunny day of January in Milan”, 161), or “fu nel febbraio del primo anno del dopoguerra (“It was in February of the first year after the end of the war”, 225).