NEGATION OF SURVIVAL IN THE POST-WAR URBAN REVIVAL: SEPTIMUS IN MRS DALLOWAY AND ÉDOUARD IN THE GREAT SWINDLE

Abstract: This paper focuses on Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway (1925) and Pierre Lemaître’s The Great Swindle (2013), with the aim of pointing out that these two novels share strikingly similar presentations of post-First World War urban social conditions. We first emphasise that in both novels there is visible post-war progress (in London and Paris, respectively), marked by obvious enthusiasm, which is, however, weakened by war consequences. In addition, we detect the presence of the sandwich board job in each novel as indicative of post-war emotional ambiguity. We then claim that the post-war social revival, as the characters of Septimus in Mrs Dalloway and Édouard in The Great Swindle suggest, is constantly being slowed down by some war survivors who, due to harsh war experiences, cannot reintegrate into society, but instead negate their own lives. Thus, as we further stress, they seem to embrace death much before they actually die. Assisted by Elizabeth Grosz’s theory of interface, we derive conclusions about the characters’ communication with the city. Lastly, we offer examples of Septimus’s and Édouard’s obsession with and anticipation of personal deaths, and of a hidden interpretation of their post-war deaths as war dying. Our final goal is to answer whether the two representatives of war survival renunciation, despite living through the war, can be said to die metaphorically in it. In addition, we recognise and (re)define a collective understanding of the war in relation to post-war novels.

Keywords: Mrs Dalloway, The Great Swindle, Septimus Warren Smith, Édouard Péricourt, the First World War, revival, survival, negation, life, death.

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1. Introduction

Among the consequences of the First World War (1914-1918), loss of human lives, of course, was the sharpest and the least reparable. Death, as in any other war, spared no group of people: soldiers or civilians, adults or children, men or women, the guilty or the innocent, those eager to die or those planning to live. Yet, as a precondition for a new life, there were survivors – the born-again crowd whose enthusiasm from time to time decreased as they struggled between two opposing feelings: the lament for the dead and the joy of staying alive. Still, the survivors went on: they recreated their happiness, rebuilt their houses, rewrote their lives. European cities, previously shattered, were reborn.

However, as some novels tangibly depict, not all of the survivors participated in this enthusiasm. Worse still than the lives lost during the war seems to be the case of those who returned from the fight but refused to remain alive.

This paper will analyse two novels which, despite being written in two different centuries, with almost one hundred years in between, have many characteristics in common. These are Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway (1925) and Pierre Lemaître’s The Great Swindle (Au revoir là-haut, 2013). Each novel presents an urban society (London and Paris, respectively) trying to recover from the horrors of the recently finished First World War. Furthermore, both books concentrate on the individual psyche, dominantly taking multiple subjective points of view. Thus, the society in each novel is in fact a network of personalities who, having survived the war, are trying, each in their own way, to reintegrate into the regained peace. However, there is another feature they share, which allows them to show that there is a flaw in the post-war enthusiastic progress. Through their characters of Septimus Warren Smith and Édouard Péricourt, Woolf and Lemaître reveal that, in addition to those who have fought in the war and happily returned, those who mourn the dead but manage to go on, and the rest who luckily have not much or at all been personally affected by the war, there are also those who have fought and lived through the war, but feel totally incapable of social reintegration.

We will first present each novel as testifying to the post-war social revival in London and Paris, pointing out that people’s enthusiasm is dimmed by the recently finished war. Then, we will be concerned with the characters of Septimus and Édouard in particular, showing that, as survivors who negate their survival, they serve as slowing factors in the post-war social progress. Following this, we will

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2 For more on the First World War and its casualties, see e.g. Encyclopædia Britannica, available at: http://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I (31/05/2016).
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prove by some examples from the novels that these two characters’ post-war lives and thoughts continually revolve around (fictive or real) death. In relation to this, we will reveal how other characters interpret and mourn the two men’s post-war death. Our final goal will be to answer the following question: can Septimus and Édouard be said to experience a metaphorical death in the war even though they actually return from it? At the same time, we will try to recognise and redefine a global understanding of the war and its consequences seen from the perspective of the two novels and the individual experience they expose.

In her essay “Bodies-Cities”, Elizabeth Grosz claims that the relationship between the body and the city is “a two-way linkage that could be defined as an interface, perhaps even a cobuilding” (1992: 248, author’s emphasis). Thus, the author is “suggesting [...] a model of the relations between bodies and cities that sees them, not as megalithic total entities, but as assemblages or collections of parts, capable of crossing the thresholds between substances to form linkages, machines, provisional and often temporary sub- or micro-groupings” (Grosz 1992: 248). Grosz’s theory suggests that the person living in a city is constantly communicating with his/her urban environment, in such a way that the body and the city complement each other’s identity. In the first two sections, we will use the theory of interface to suggest the characters’ intense communication with the city or a possible negation of such interaction.

2. [B]ut it was over; thank Heaven – over. (Woolf 1996: 6)

Although the focus of Mrs Dalloway (1925) is on individual and internal life – mostly Clarissa Dalloway’s, this whole stream-of-consciousness novel would have no sense without its setting: London of the 1920s. That setting is more significant here than, for example, time, is confirmed in Susan Dick’s article on literary realism in Woolf’s novels. Dick states that “[a]lthough the events in the narrative take place on a specific date, that fact is disclosed more slowly than is the setting” (2004: 52). Actually, even though the year 1923 is indirectly revealed and the month of June clearly mentioned, “[Woolf] never discloses the date” (Dick 2004: 52). By contrast, “[t]he [London] setting is established immediately” (Dick 2004: 52). In truth, Mrs Dalloway has not been personally affected by the First World War, which ended several years before, and her individual malaise, caused by her past decision to marry the wrong man and resulting in suicidal intentions, is her main preoccupation. However, we must not forget that she is a Londoner, and a very special one. As an MP’s wife, Clarissa not only belongs to London’s high society, she is one of the
most popular female figures within the crème of Londoners. Her parties, just like herself, are well known and full of life. Being one of London’s symbols, Clarissa identifies with her city – its architectural elements and nature, but also its people.

All this indicates that there is a strong two-way linkage between the heroine and her city throughout the novel. During her interface with London, which becomes more powerful during her morning city walk, she is able to feel and express in thinking a particular mixture of the city’s emotions. She senses that London is experiencing a revival, as the war definitely belongs to the past. Similar to herself, who, in spite of all her regrets and incomplete happiness, readily and wholeheartedly devotes her life to her present role and evening duty, the city seems to be preparing a daylight party. While Clarissa hurries to buy some flowers for her house, and symbolically some joy for her soul, London around her celebrates the present and salutes the future:

It was June. The King and Queen were at the Palace. And everywhere, though it was still so early, there was a beating, a stirring of galloping ponies, tapping of cricket bats; Lords, Ascot, Ranelagh and all the rest of it; wrapped in the soft mash of the grey-blue morning air [...], the whirling young men, and laughing girls in their transparent muslins who, even now, after dancing all night, were taking their absurd woolly dogs for a run; and even now, at this hour, discreet old dowagers were shooting out in their motor cars on errands of mystery; and the shopkeepers were fidgeting in their windows with their paste and diamonds, [...], and she, too, loving it as she did with an absurd and faithful passion, being part of it [...], she, too, was going that very night to kindle and illuminate; to give her party. (Woolf 1996: 6-7, emphasis added)

However, just as Clarissa’s personal past is too troublesome to leave her at peace, London’s own wartime past is too painful and fresh to be entirely forgotten:

The War was over, except for some one like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed [...]; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed; [...] (Woolf 1996: 6-7)

Commenting on an example of war motifs and associations in Mrs Dalloway, Laura Marcus says that it “is an indication of the extent to which the novel is caught up with the after-shocks of war” (2004: 71). Based on this, Marcus as well concludes that Clarissa’s thoughts at the beginning of the novel imply that “the War is over [...] [but] the mourning is not” (2004: 71), so that “the novel veers between the modes of ecstasy and despair” (2004: 72).
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However, it is optimism that seems to radiate from the concluding thoughts of Clarissa’s quoted monologue: “but it was over; thank Heaven – over” (Woolf 1996: 6, emphasis added). Despite unavoidable difficulties of all kinds, followed by uncertain enthusiasm, the city, just like Mrs Dalloway who in the end prevents her own suicide, is able to survive the post-war crisis and look forward to the future.

Even though the beginning of The Great Swindle (2013) shows the very last days of the First World War and a struggle for survival of young soldiers Albert Maillard and Édouard Péricourt, the novel’s key part concentrates on the two characters’ post-war life in Paris – their home city. As a matter of fact, the two men did not know each other before the war, and their relationship before the last battle they participate in was at the level of acquaintances. However, the last fight before the already definite Armistice, cunningly and unnecessarily initiated by their lieutenant to satisfy his need for last-minute promotion, inextricably links Albert and Édouard forever. Struggling for breath with large amounts of earth falling over him, Albert is rescued by wounded Édouard, who at this moment receives shrapnel in the face.

Life in post-war Paris, just like in post-war London, is by no means easy. Unsupported former soldiers either have difficulties healing their wounds or finding decent employment and accommodation. The rich regain an opportunity to prosper, as the social crisis for them often turns out a lucrative business. However, the latter are emotionally broken as they face the loss of their sons and brothers. Still, as Albert, an accountant of modest origin, reveals through his thinking on one occasion, a revival is obvious. Just like in Mrs Dalloway’s London, the revival in Paris is most clearly seen among the wealthy. Therefore, Albert’s image resulting from his own interface with the city is very similar to the one Clarissa presents: men chatting about ordinary things, women laughing, and children playing. However, while flowers intended for house parties symbolise the everyday, Clarissa’s optimism, their bouquets also remind of flowers’ other purposes: marriage celebrations (frequently prevented as many bachelors have not returned from the war) and, of course, the mourning of the dead:

Along the boulevard, falsely busied women went out of their carriages, servants followed them, carrying packages. Delivery vehicles stopped in front of the service doors, the chauffeurs talked to stiff footmen […], while a bit further away, on the pavement […] two young women elegantly dressed, tall as matches, arm in arm, walked down the street laughing. At the corner of the boulevard, two men greeted each other, a newspaper under the arm, a top hat in the hand, dear friend, see you soon, they had an air of court judges. One of them stepped aside to make room for a little boy dressed in a marine uniform and pushing a hoop, the nanny hurried after yelling at low voice, apologised to the gentlemen;
Jelena Lj. Pršić

A strikingly similar detail appearing in both Clarissa’s and Albert’s presentations of their respective cities, is the presence of the so-called “sandwich men” in the streets. Sandwich men refer to people employed to carry two advertising boards (front and back) hanging from their shoulders. The sandwich board job used to be popular first in the 19th century, then disappeared in the early 20th century, only to appear again at the time of the Great Depression (in the 1930s), as a cheap way of advertising. Still, the fact that both of these novels include sandwich men in their city street images testifies to an even earlier comeback of this way of advertising. Obviously, it was a job poorly paid but easily acceptable by former soldiers who had no other option but to do anything for a living. Symbolically, however, these men stand for the general weakness of post-war enthusiasm precisely: people struggle or are sandwiched between two opposing feelings – the lament for the dead and the joy of being alive.

Mrs Dalloway only briefly mentions these street employees, in her initial interior monologue when she describes her love for London. Yet, she makes us notice them and remember their suggestive name:

In people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar;
the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging;
brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life, London; this moment of June. (Woolf 1996: 6, emphasis added)

The difficult movements of sandwich men, expressed by “shuffling and swinging”, resemble the overall post-war psychological state. In addition, the heaviness is intensified by the mention of an aeroplane – a detail directly reminiscent of the war and its harsh consequences.

While working during one period as a sandwich man in Paris, Albert dislikes his job. This feeling, however, is not caused only by the fact that the boards are

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3 All extracts from The Great Swindle have been taken from its French original (Au revoir là-haut, 2013) and translated into English by the author of this paper.
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considerably heavy to carry along Paris boulevards in all weathers. It also results from the fact that Albert is an educated man now forced to take up any employment to support himself and his invalid roommate Édouard. After the experience of being sandwiched between a need for money and social injustice, once dear parts of Paris will change forever:

Before, he used to love The Grands Boulevards immensely. Since he began strolling along them with his two-sided advertisement, it was not the same any more. (Lemaitre 2013: 262)

When compared to Clarissa’s, Albert’s picture of the sandwich board job, therefore, is more indicative of the post-war emotional ambiguity, as well as personal and social pressure. However, both sandwich board images testify to the existence of a constant interface between people and the city in the post-war years, which again confirms human readiness to recover from the war and embrace a new urban future, no matter how difficult.

3. It is I who am blocking the way, he thought. (Woolf 1996: 18)

As shown in each novel, optimism and enthusiasm, although inevitably vulnerable, are a fact of post-war London and Paris. However, the progress directed towards social well-being and (ideally complete) healing of physical and mental wounds, is constantly being slowed down by individuals such as Septimus Warren Smith from Mrs Dalloway and Édouard Péricourt from The Great Swindle. Septimus and Édouard have fought in the war and survived it, but, after suffering extremely agonising moments on the battlefield, they are incapable of overcoming the experience and reintegrating into the normal life – personal and social. Each in his own way, the two men not only clash with the rest of the city (their friends, family members, doctors, unknown cohabitants, etc.), they refuse to live in the post-war social context and seem to negate their own existence.

Septimus Warren Smith, a war veteran in his early thirties, used to be a poet and enjoy life. However, since his return from the war, he has been suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Post-traumatic stress disorder is an emotional condition following a traumatic experience, especially an event involving actual or threatened death, or a serious physical injury, and creating feelings of fear, helplessness, or horror (Encyclopædia Britannica, Internet). As a matter of fact, Septimus returns

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5 Clearly, Albert’s experience on the battlefield is no less agonising than Édouard’s, yet the negative influence of war shocks on his post-war life, while frequent, is not as extreme as Édouard’s.
from the war physically unharmed, but in no way was he able to avoid witnessing other men being wounded or killed. Despite going to the war as a volunteer, he was too fragile and unprepared for its horrors, then made insensitive by atrocities, only to be reverted to post-war oversensitivity (paradoxically accompanied by a repeated feeling that “he could not feel” (Woolf 1996: 96)). Still, what has led Septimus to post-traumatic stress disorder is not so much the experience of overall war evils, but a very specific situation in which a friend of his dies:

Septimus was one of the first to volunteer. He went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square. There in the trenches [...] he developed manliness; he was promoted; he drew the attention, indeed the affection of his officer, Evans by name. [...] But when Evans [...] was killed, just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognising that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. (Woolf 1996: 95-96).

As we have seen through Clarissa Dalloway’s eyes, on the presented June day in London people are busy doing everyday things and thinking about parties, fashion, pets, socialising. It is only the cry of a mourning mother or the ominous sound of an aeroplane that still reminds Londoners of the war. Septimus, however, cannot forgive himself a lack of emotion at the moment of his fellow soldier’s death in battle, and the fact that he “congratulated himself” on his phlegmatism. Logically then, for him everything in London is reminiscent of the war: sounds, light, words, even people. Septimus goes so far to as to hallucinate and identify one of the London walkers (Clarissa’s former suitor Peter Walsh) with his dead friend and officer Evans, whom his guilty conscience eagerly revives.

In his book *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, Alex Zwerdling states that Septimus’s mental condition was seen in post-war London as cowardice, while the British Parliament decided that it should be cured in two stages: first by persuasion and then, if this fails, by coercion (1986: 30). Septimus is undergoing the first procedure and is about to start the second one. His doctors Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw are representatives of these two methods, respectively. While Holmes suggests relaxing and directing the patient’s attention to everyday activities, Bradshaw orders hospitalisation, that is Septimus’s separation from his wife Lucrezia and prevention of any direct contact with society. However, Septimus rejects any medical help despite his wife’s willingness to turn his wandering attention to ordinary things and try everything to return her “old” husband. As Zwerdling remarks, in his rejection of medical help, Septimus is fully supported by his author,
who, by using a specific language to suggest the doctors’ inhumane nature (words such as “swoop”, “devour”, “force”, etc.) “is clearly on the side of the victim” (1986: 31). Obviously, Zwerdling goes on, Woolf here rethinks politics by translating a public issue into an individual human situation, so that “[p]ublic life and private life are inextricably intertwined” (1986: 31).

In his article “Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway: ‘A Well of Tears’”, George A. Panichas says that “Septimus Warren Smith [...] epitomize[s] a way of life that would undergo cataclysmic changes and that would never return when the maroons boomed on November 11, 1918” (2004: 238). In other words, as we have mentioned earlier, although the war has ended, its damage cannot be overlooked or entirely repaired – globally as well as individually. Throughout Mrs Dalloway, Septimus remains the supreme example of how permanent war consequences can actually be, since to the very end he remains “unrepaired”. As Panichas further remarks, “[h]is mind and heart remain captives of his war sufferings, which he never transcends, such are their conscious and unconscious ache and pain” (2004: 239). Thus, in spite of his mental instability, Septimus knows that his cold-blooded behaviour is indelible from his past and his memory by any medical method. At the same time, he declines to live with the burden of guilt and, since his present is marked by this burden, he refuses to have any present, or future. Therefore, as the whole city celebrates the present and heads for the future, Septimus acts as a slowing factor in this process. Moreover, he unconsciously seems to confirm this at one point in the novel – upon a car tyre explosion in the street. The event, naturally, frightens all walkers and makes them “of course, sto[p] and star[e]” (Woolf 1996: 16), reminding most of them of the war. Septimus as well “f[inds] himself unable to pass” (Woolf 1996: 17) and halts in the middle of the street, at the same time causing many cars to stop. However, several moments later, when everyone is ready to forget the scene and go on, Septimus is still standing, incapable of moving on. When it finally crosses his mind that the drivers might be signalling to him, he silently concludes: “It is I who am blocking the way” (Woolf 1996: 18). Indeed, even when immobile, Septimus is swimming against the tide. Although he physically belongs to the present time London, Septimus’s mind rejects any participation in the present social context, thus negating even one of the firmest phenomena of urban life – interface between the man and the city.

Considering The Great Swindle to be a novel which is “alternately tender and ghoulish”, Edward Wilson says that “[t]he dark side of glittering 1920s Paris was the limping army of battle-damaged mutilés glaring from the shadows” (Internet). Obviously, the one who belongs to the City of Light’s dark side is 24-year-old...
veteran Édouard Péricourt – an unconventional artist and latent homosexual, who has never been understood or supported by his bourgeois father, Monsieur Marcel Péricourt. In Wilson’s review, Édouard is referred to as an “artist manqué” (Internet), both to suggest his lack of success in art and to highlight the contrast on which his whole being, just like the entire book, is based. After being wounded in the leg and losing most of his face, Édouard is recuperating in a war hospital. Similar to Septimus, however, he does not embrace medical help. From the first day of his convalescence, he has eagerly received shots of morphine relieving his excruciating pains, but he now decidedly rejects an aesthetic surgery. He thus acts selfishly towards Albert (like Septimus towards Lucrezia, just a bit more consciously), as this decision, among other things, will later indirectly force his friend to take care of and financially support him. A doctor ensures Édouard that the intervention would fix his face; however, his answer is negative, even if he is aware that with no face, his life (both personal and social) will have no sense:

Édouard wrote to doctor Maudret that he refused aesthetic intervention of any kind and asked to be released into civilian life as soon as possible.
- With a head like that?
The doctor, furious. He had Édouard’s letter in his right hand, with the left holding firmly his shoulder in front of the mirror.
Édouard took a long look at this swelling magma in which he found again, lost, as well as veiled, features of the face he used to know. The flesh, folded, formed large cushions of milky white. In the middle of the face, the gap, partly reduced by stretching and contracting of the tissue, was a sort of a crater, more distant than before but always so glowing. One would say a circus contortionist capable of swallowing his whole cheeks and upper jaw, and incapable of taking the reverse road.
-Yes, Édouard confirmed, with a head like this. (Lemaitre 2013: 112-113)

According to the promise, a new face would obviously give Édouard back his old identity. However, neglected and overly judged by his narrow-minded father, his identity was undermined and scorned as early as in the pre-war years. Then, by destroying his face – the most prominent outer sign of his person, which he himself is unable now to remember clearly, the Republic’s dishonest representative who started the last battle seems to take away Édouard’s identity in a violent and cruel way. How far would be a surgically fabricated, that is a socially acceptable, face from the original Édouard – unwanted, unsupported, and insignificant? Doubtless, very far it would be. Would it be able to erase the past – annul his father’s and the country’s unjust acts? Obviously, it would not. Anyway, he wants neither his father’s
Nor the Republic’s compassion. With his attitude that “[t]his injustice[…] is] no one’s fault and everyone’s fault at the same time” (Lemaitre 2013: 105), Édouard, like Septimus, seems to be “blocking” the steady social progress and refusing a proper life in the post-war society. Moreover, having lost his tongue together with the face, Édouard cannot use his native language, which is another signifier of his outcast status. Again, Édouard also appears to enjoy his author’s support in his own rejection of medical help. In the quoted passage, this is clearly shown by sad irony underlying the unusual comparisons with an imperfect acrobat in the description of the hero’s distorted face. Seeing the novel as “a dark postwar tale” and claiming that cynicism is typical of all characters, Sarah Lyall claims that “[t]he war has created a class of unemployable, grievously damaged veterans whom France is eager to forget, even as it sentimentalizes their heroism (Internet). Her inference therefore is that “the nation […] sentenced [Édouard] to a living death while pretending to glorify his sacrifice” (Lyall, Internet, emphasis added). This view seems to be confirmed by the hero’s own desperate thoughts that “Édouard [is] dead weight”, a human ruin void of all feelings except sadness (Lemaitre 2013: 247). As for Édouard’s beliefs in the eyes of his father, unable to vindicate them while having his face, he would be even less so without looking like himself or by looking like a fake Édouard. Going back home to his family, therefore, is also out of the question.

A little more analytic than Septimus, Édouard goes even further in the negation of his own existence. Immediately after the battle, Édouard wishes a new identity, planning to abuse the lack of a recognisable part of himself. Albert involuntarily but loyally steals the identity of a dead comrade and fulfils his friend’s wish. Thus, soon afterwards, as if confirming his already assumed death, “Édouard Péricourt is about to die for France. And Eugène Larivièrè, resurrected from the dead, henceforth has a long life ahead of him to remember” (Lemaitre 2013: 99). With time, Édouard discovers masks as a perfect manner of covering his almost absent face. Furthermore, he starts to enjoy wearing them and almost regenerates his love of life. He designs them himself, putting all his artistic effort into their beauty. In this way, at first sight Édouard seems to try and recreate his lost self. However, he is incapable of deciding on one mask only, never wears one twice, and hangs old masks on the wall “like hunting trophies” (Lemaitre 2013: 225). He actually reads many fabricated selves into these masks and detaches his body from each of them as soon as he realises another one should suit his (already vague and incomplete) personality better. Finally, Édouard’s behaviour while wearing masks is also of interest:
Édouard [...] wore a kind of a mask, night blue, which began under the nose and covered the whole bottom part of the face, up to the neck, like barb, that of an actor from a Greek tragedy. [...]
Albert showed surprise. Édouard made a theatrical gesture with his hand, as if asking: “Well, what do you think?” (Lemaitre 2013: 224)

Édouard’s masks, as we can see, indicate the existence of a theatre rather than real life. Therefore, there is no such thing as recreating the hero’s lost self. Either on or behind paper faces worn by a person artificially reborn as dead man Eugène Larivièrè, there is in fact neither Édouard Péricourt nor someone else. Whatever face he wears, the hero’s core lack of identity, in this case as well, suggests a decided negation of interface with the city.

4. I deeply regret to inform you that [your son Édouard] died in combat last 2 November. (Lemaitre 2013: 103)

Septimus’s and Édouard’s obsession with and anticipation of personal deaths, as an extreme manifestation of their disgust with life, are suggested by an identically termed phenomenon they both reach: revelation (French “révélation”). Upon “seeing” Evans during his London walk, Septimus comes to an “astonishing revelation”, as he “open[s] his eyes” (Woolf 1996: 77) and in front of them “beauty spr[ings] instantly” (Woolf 1996: 77). He identifies the world around him as beautiful; however, the world he is able to see and interpret is an illusion: a vision of dead people being alive, trees behaving like humans, and nature communicating. The world of beauty is the world of the dead. The only way for Septimus to reach beauty and feel alive is to be dead like Evans. Detecting beauty everywhere, he mentions, among other things, “the houses, the railings” (Woolf 1996: 77), and later on, running away from Dr Holmes and his treatment, he will meet death by jumping from a house window onto its area railings. Indeed, Septimus has openly threatened to kill himself and throughout the novel he seems to be guided by this intention as well as supported in it by outer signs. To Lucrezia’s innocent question “What is the time?” (Woolf 1996: 78), Septimus decidedly replies “I will tell you the time” (Woolf 1996: 79). Cutting him short but also confirming the intended end of his sentence, the clock, although it is actually midday and not midnight, ominously strikes “the quarter to twelve” (Woolf 1996: 79).

Similarly, Édouard attempts to kill himself by jumping out of a war hospital window. However, physical weakness after the last battle prevents him from
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succeeding in this. Albert, who is seriously worried about this, finally becomes certain that Édouard’s first suicide attempt is simultaneously his last one. Implying that the courage to commit such an act can be plucked up only once in a lifetime, Albert reckons that Édouard “will never have the courage again” (Lemaitre 2013: 91), but will instead be “condemned to living” (Lemaitre 2013: 91). Although the accuracy of Albert’s first supposition is debatable (Édouard’s later drug abuse can be recognised as a form of another suicide attempt), the latter one is unquestionable: Édouard’s obsession with death and premonitions of death actually turn his life into torture.

Despite losing a large part of his face, Édouard, luckily, still has eyes. In the absence of the rest of the face and some senses (for example, he has no mouth and cannot eat or taste normally), his eyesight most probably becomes more acute. However, Édouard’s insight into his own feelings seems to be even sharper, especially after initiating with Albert a scam against the Republic (“the great swindle”) and becoming a heroin addict. Alone in a hotel room after dishonestly earning a lot of money by selling non-existent monuments, Édouard seems to interpret the origin of his sadness, putting it down to his enormous pre-war love of life. In addition, he is trying to explain an image that, after everything else is gone, cannot vanish from his mind – the picture of his father:

Why did the image of his father continue to haunt him?
Because their story had not finished.
This idea stopped Édouard in his gesture. Like a revelation.
Every story should meet its end, this is in the order of life. Even tragic, even insupportable, even derisory, every single story needs an ending, and with his father, there had been no ending, the two of them had parted as declared enemies, had never met again, one was dead, the other was not, but neither had pronounced the words of the end.
(Lemaitre 2013: 464, emphasis added)

Even in his thoughts, Édouard refers to himself as dead and absent from the real world. Moreover, at this epiphanic stage, he seems to regret “the fact” that he is no longer alive and cannot see his father again and possibly reconcile with him. In truth, some time after his son’s alleged death, Monsieur Péricourt starts wrestling with his conscience, increasingly aware of his harsh attitude towards Édouard. Even though he has always opposed Édouard’s artistic tendencies, he now becomes aware of what he actually reproached Édouard while alive:

No, what M. Péricourt had never forgiven his son, was not what he did, but what he was: Édouard had an overly high-pitched voice, he was too thin, too
anxious about his posture, his gestures were too...It was not difficult to see, he really was effeminate. (Lemaitre 2013: 189, author’s emphasis)

Édouard’s sister Madelaine buries “her brother’s dead body” (in fact a body randomly chosen by Albert at a war cemetery) in the family tomb and her father once suddenly decides to visit it, overwhelmed by emotions. He eagerly chooses and orders a grand monument for his son, not even supposing that it is Édouard who, in order to take vengeance on everybody but mostly to amuse himself, pretends to build this very model and many others. Of course, largely excluded from the outside world, Édouard does not know any of this. Yet, deep inside he does know (otherwise he would not pretend his death), just as his father knows, that the two of them can be on good terms only with Édouard dead. Even his father acknowledges that he “[denied] everything to this son, he only [left] the war for him to die” (Lemaitre 2013: 190). To Édouard, then, the war (another “great swindle” in which his father somehow seems to be involved as well) serves as escape, but also as an opportunity to “perform” probably the only “action” his father would approve of. Speaking of an ending, ironically and unfortunately, the son–father relationship will have one near the closure of the novel. Walking absent-mindedly down a street in a bizarre colonial costume with green, angelic-like wings, Édouard will meet his father driving a car, unaware of the encounter. However, they will have no time to talk to each other (Édouard would not be able to utter his specific voice anyway). Several moments later, Édouard dies, hit by Monsieur Péricourt’s car. Later it is proclaimed an accident, and indeed, regardless of the fact that Édouard intentionally halts in front of the car, it is an accident. Édouard’s thoughts prior to this scene are not suicidal; on the contrary, his mind focuses on running away with the illegally obtained money and completing his swindle. Moreover, Édouard’s continuous life behind masks has strengthened his sense of not existing as a real person – a feeling which has also been supported by the hero’s intense drug abuse. Guided by unreliable consciousness, Édouard feels no need to rush into death, as death is already considered his current state. Instead, he believes he could fly with his wings and the moment of his failed attempt to do so proves actually fatal. Of course, his military steps (probably distorted by a dysfunctional leg), complemented by a broom carried in lieu of a weapon, indicate Édouard’s steady ridicule of the war. The culmination of this ridicule seems to be our realisation that not even as a dead hero, or an assumed angel, has he been granted immortality. In spite of this literal, post-war ending, the story of the father and the son, in essence, did end upon Édouard’s departure to the war. Therefore, what looks in Édouard’s earlier revelation like the son’s temporary hope for a new relationship with his father (and
a new life), is in fact only his circular return to, and unconscious prediction of, his (permanent necessity of) dying.

Another marker of Septimus’s and Édouard’s post-war linkage with death is parallel existence of a living alter ego in both cases. By renouncing their own lives, they seem to “buy” the lives of their alter egos, who continue living after their fictive and/or real deaths. Septimus’s alter ego is Clarissa Dalloway, whom he actually never meets. This connection becomes clear much before the end, since both of them develop suicidal thoughts as a result of past events they cannot come to terms with. Of course, Clarissa’s psychological state never reaches Septimus’s stage, and, unlike him, she never openly expresses her suicidal tendencies. Yet, her stream of thinking clearly indicates such an epilogue. However, of the two only Septimus commits suicide. Hearing of his death (so similar to the one she has been thinking about) from Dr. Bradshaw during her party, she becomes obsessed with the news and even leaves her guests. At the window of a small room, she is considering whether to do the same as Septimus or not. On the one hand, acting by imitation, she seems to be encouraged to repeat his act and even identifies with him: “She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself” (Woolf 1996: 204). On the other, visualising his moments of dying, she realises what it really means to die (“Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes” (Woolf 1996: 202)). Seeing an old woman in the opposite house – a projection of herself in old age, she understands that dying is not what she truly wants. Interestingly, comparing this moment with a similar point of realisation in another Woolf’s novel, David Daiches refers to it as Clarissa’s “final illumination” (1945: 91). “Illumination” in this phrase highly resembles Septimus’s “revelation” and Édouard’s “rêvélation”. However, Clarissa’s epiphany does not anticipate death, like the previous two. On the contrary, it envisages life. Eventually, Mrs Dalloway goes back to her guests, aware that it is this unknown man who, dead as he is, has just saved her life by pledging his own: “she felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living” (Woolf 1996: 204). Édouard’s alter ego is Albert Maillard – his comrade, friend, and carer. Unlike Clarissa, who is saved by Septimus only once, Albert seems to be rescued twice by Édouard. Firstly, while rescuing Albert on the battlefield, in exchange for his comrade’s life, Édouard gives his face, which, as we have seen, practically means renouncing his whole life. Albert thus seems to be the only living element of Édouard surviving the war, while the date of Édouard’s alleged death – 2 November 1918 – can be seen as the date of Albert’s rebirth. During their common life in post-war Paris, Albert is continually doing all that Édouard can no longer do: working and earning money, providing
food and morphine, falling in love, going out, talking – in a word, living. Both Édouard and Albert seem aware of this death-life symmetry. Édouard, despite not regretting the fact that he saved a life, knows that “if it had not been for this soldier Maillard to be interred alive, he would now be at home, entire (Lemaitre 2013: 105, emphasis added). Similarly, Albert feels that “the young man [Édouard] delegated his existence to him, handed it over to him, because he can neither carry it by himself nor get rid of it” (Lemaitre 2013: 91). Secondly, near the end of the novel, instead of meeting with Albert and his fiancée Pauline, and leaving for the colonies, Édouard “once again” dies. One more time, it appears, he lays down his life so that his alter ego can go on living somewhere else at peace. Supposing that survival of both culprits is hardly to be expected, only Albert gets the opportunity to escape from their personal war against French authorities.

Finally, other characters’ thoughts and behaviour seem to place unconsciously Septimus’s and Édouard’s deaths in the pre-Armistice period, thus also suggesting their post-war non-existence. Even though they die after the war, of causes other than physical wounds gained in battle, Septimus and Édouard are both mourned like soldiers who have actually never returned from the war. A part of Clarissa’s comment on Septimus’s suicidal jump: “There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness” (Woolf 1996: 202) looks like a description of a dying warrior (for example, it reminds of a manner of dying that Albert luckily escapes). At the same time, her concluding question: “But why had he done it?” (Woolf 1996: 202) resembles a mother’s lament for a lost son who, for reasons unknown to her, decided to go to the war. Moreover, Septimus’s wife Lucrezia, shocked by her husband’s act (despite his suicide threats) falls asleep under sedation while interpreting the house owner’s apron as a flag saluting Septimus like “men killed in battle” (Woolf 1996: 165). Realising that Édouard will not make it on time, Albert bursts into tears while sitting next to Pauline on a train. Although he does not know what has happened with Édouard and there is probably no way of ever finding out, Albert’s tears are tears of lament for the dead. In truth, Édouard is physically extremely weak – not only is he an invalid, but also a drug addict, who, just before their leaving, nearly kills himself after overdosing on heroin. Albert knows that death in such circumstances is frequent and expected. However, what convinces him of Édouard’s death is not a reasonable conclusion but the close bond between them based on strong empathy. In addition, mourning Édouard ought to be interpreted as a lament for a dead soldier, as the same empathy must make it

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6For instance, thus understood, the question reminds a lot of Jacob’s mother’s lament for her son in Woolf’s Jacob’s Room.
clear to Albert that the origin of Édouard’s death is the moment of his own second birth – the day of their last battle.

5. Conclusion

Focusing on characteristics of the post-First World War revival in some European cities, we have compared the novels Mrs Dalloway and The Great Swindle. These works testify to the extent of the post-war social progress but also reveal ambiguity of overall feelings in post-war London and Paris, respectively. Like Clarissa Dalloway, who is constantly trying to leave her past behind her and be happy preparing her party, London seems to be eager to forget the war and go on. However, just as Clarissa feels incapable of complete happiness, the city society as well experiences a mixture of feelings: pain and loss as opposed to enthusiasm. This emotional ambiguity, we have noted, has also been remarked by Laura Marcus, who uses the terms of “ecstasy” and “despair” to suggest the two extremes. In a similar way, The Great Swindle reveals that life in post-war Paris, although difficult, has all characteristics of a revival. Albert Maillard’s picture of a wealthy part of Paris, which best shows the city’s progress, as we have seen, much resembles Clarissa Dalloway’s description of London. However, he as well concludes that the war has left negative consequences, for instance, it has prevented many weddings. In this respect, despite general enthusiasm, we have detected a strikingly similar detail that confirms the post-war emotional ambiguity – the presence of the so-called “sandwich men”. These street employees, usually impoverished former soldiers, symbolically represent the whole society that struggles between clashing feelings of lamentation and joy. Acknowledging Elizabeth Grosz’s theory of the body-city interface, we can conclude that Clarissa and Albert, as well as most people in their cities, despite the mixture of collective and personal emotions, unquestionably have constant two-way communication with their cities and societies. In this way, they only further confirm their willingness to participate in the post-war revival.

Yet, we have remarked that this social progress (which is definite despite its weakened enthusiasm) in both novels shows some more serious flaws. The revival, we have seen, is continually being thwarted by individuals such as Septimus Warren Smith in Mrs Dalloway and Édouard Péricourt in The Great Swindle. As war survivors who went to the war emotionally unprepared and then faced some of its worst atrocities, they feel unable to overcome the experience, negating their own survival and existence in the post-war years. In this manner, the two heroes seem to embrace death even before it actually happens. Within this negation, Septimus
acts more unconsciously as his problem is almost entirely psychological. Tortured by the memory of his inability to empathise with the pains of a dying friend, he hallucinates and ignores the reality, living in a world of his own – the world of the dead. On the other hand, Édouard, whose problem is both psychological (a lack of identity, deep sadness and frustration) and physical (a lack of the face, tongue, etc.), is more radical: pronouncing himself dead, he illegally acquires a new identity – ironically, that of a dead comrade. However, we have pointed out that both Septimus (still alive but incapable of normal life) and Édouard (with another man’s identity but his own wounds) reject medical help and are supported by their authors in doing this. Thus, they openly refuse to recuperate their old selves and declare (a new) war to their social systems. Even numerous masks Édouard makes, puts on his lost face, and then takes it off to make new ones, only lead him to an even greater absence of identity. In contrast to the previously analysed characters, Septimus and Édouard, by refusing to live in the post-war city, automatically negate interface with their urban environments.

Finally, we have offered some examples to illustrate Septimus’s and Édouard’s obsession with and anticipation of personal deaths. Through the phenomenon of “revelation”, they both seem to predict their (real) dying. For instance, Septimus identifies beauty with the world of the dead and connects it verbally to conditions in which he will later die by committing suicide. Although Édouard fails in killing himself out of desperation in a war hospital, at a moment of epiphany he visualises his father, who will later kill him in a car accident. In addition, both Septimus and Édouard have their living alter egos – Clarissa and Albert. Their alter egos remain alive thanks to them, as they directly and/or indirectly give their lives in exchange for theirs. Thus, the alter egos confirm the two men’s deaths (first intended/psychological/fictive, then real). Moreover, we have shown that the fact that they are both mourned like killed soldiers although they die after the war, also implies their lack of post-war true existence.

Considering all this, we may raise a logical (and largely rhetorical) question: do Septimus Warren Smith and Édouard Péricourt, as representatives of the post-war negation of survival, experience a kind of metaphorical death, humanly recognised and masterfully exposed by Woolf and Lemaitre, in spite of the fact that they actually survive the war? With this question, we may also pose the following one: are not war survivors sometimes ungrateful for living through the war? But this one as well: what does it actually mean to remain alive – is it only to have one’s heart still pounding, or to have one’s body entire not matter how one feels? If the answer to the last one is negative, that is to say, if surviving means living fully with one’s mind
Negation of Survival in the Post-war Urban Revival: Septimus in Mrs Dalloway and Édouard in The Great Swindle

and body, being ready to remember and mourn the dead but also rejoice in having one’s own present and future, being capable of clearly distinguishing between life and death and accepting oneself as steadily belonging to the first sphere, then we can decidedly reply that English soldier Septimus and French soldier Édouard die in the First World War. Whether the exact moments of their deaths can be identified as Septimus’s loss of emotion and Édouard’s loss of his face, or as something else, it has no importance. What matters is that their lives, as well as their wish for living, are forever gone with the war. Therefore, thus analysed, Mrs Dalloway and The Great Swindle suggest a bitter post-war truth we are not able to learn so often elsewhere: even though no statistics can reasonably count them as killed soldiers, there are war survivors to whom the survival never truly happens and the return from the war never actually occurs.

In the end, the novels’ implication of hidden truth at the level of individual experience leads us to the issue of a global understanding of the war and its consequences. The historical institution of war survivors usually indicates a post-war interpretation of the returned as lucky, physically and/or mentally reparable, and, above all, alive. A strong need for a revision of the events in the modern and the post-modern novel, however, seems to reduce this positioning of values to what it often is – a common misconception.

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НЕГАЦИЈА ЖИВОТА У ПОСЛЕРАТНОМ ОЖИВЉАВАЊУ ГРАДА: СЕПТИМУС У ГОСПОЂИ ДАЛОВЕЈИ И ЕДУАР У ДОВИЂЕЊА, ТАМО ГОРЕ

Резиме

Рад упоређује и анализира романе Вирциније Вулф и Пјера Лемстра – *Господи Даловеј* (1925) и *Довиђења, тамо горе* (2013), са циљем да покаже да оба романа, на невероватно сличне начине, приказују друштвене услове у европским градовима (први у Лондону, други у Паризу) после Првог светског рата (1914—1918). У раду најпре откривамо да градска атмосфера и индивидуална перспектива у оба романа доказују да у послератном Лондону и Паризу без сумње влада групни ентузијазам усмерен ка напретку и процвата новог живота. Међутим, оба дела такође сутеришу да поменути ентузијазам није безрезерван, већ ослабљен последицама рата. Уочавамо присуство такозваних „сендвич-људи” – уличних носилаца рекламних табли као индикатора послератног емотивног амбивалентета. Затим наглашавамо да овај социјални прогрес (који је дефинитиван упркос несигурном ентузијазму), као што оба романа доказују, има своје озвиђене пукотине. Назиме, као што показује лих Септимуса у првом и лих Едуара у другом роману, појединци који су прежи-
већи рат, али, услед тешких ратних тренутака, нису у стању да се 
реинтегришу у друштво, фактори су који коче социјални прогрес 
послераатног града. Сваки на свој начин, први мање, други више 
свесно, оба лика, који при томе уживују подршку својих аутора 
у одбијању медицинске помоћи, негирају своју егзистенцију у 
послераатном друштву, те се на известан начин опредељују за смрт 
и пре него што она заиста наступи. Позивајући се на теорију 
интерфејса Елизабет Грос, према којој човек и град константно 
комуницирају један другоме градећи идентитет, показали смо да 
се ова теорија потврђује у случају послераатних градских житеља 
који, попут Кларисе и Албера, прихватају све лепоте и тескобе 
новог ураатног живота. Међутим, такође смо указали на то да се у 
случају ратних ветерана који одбијају да живе после рата, као што 
то чине Септимус и Едуар, чак и интерфејс, као једна од суштин-
ских и најпостојанијих појава у градском животу, негира и самим 
tим зауставља. Након тога нудимо примере којима доказујемо 
опседнутост ове двојице ликова смрћу и њихово антиципирање 
сопствене стварне смрти: они пролазе кроз готово истоветан 
феномен „открива“, који их води ка властитом крају и обојица 
имају альтер его коме поклањају живот. Чињеница да се оба јунака 
оплакују као погибли војници иако умру после рата такође 
сугерише њихово непостојање у послераатном времену. Коначно, 
рад покушава да одговори на питање да ли се за Септимуса и Еду-
ара, као представнике негације послераатног живота, може рећи 
да, упркос повратку са бојног поља, у рату метафорички умиру. 
С тим у вези, долази се до закључка да, немајући прави живот 
нити жељу за животом после рата, ова два јунака суштински гину 
у рату, на известан начин се показујући као његове незабележене 
људске жртве. Такође, увиђамо да снажна потреба за ревизијом 
догађаја у романима после Првог светског рата настоји да сведе 
послераатно глобално разумевање рата и његових последица на 
ono што то разумевање, нажалост, често и јесте — на колективну 
заблуду.