

Self-censorship in Massimo Bontempelli's Magical Realism

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1. Introduction

This article investigates the interplay between censorship, self-censorship and the narrative strategies of 'realismo magico' in *Il figlio di due madri* (FDM) by Italian author Massimo Bontempelli (1878–1960).

Critics have noted that Bontempelli – head of the National Fascist Writers' Union from mid- to late-1920s – voiced his detachment from the Fascist credo in his work from mid- to late-1930s. I problematise this perspective, by recognising the significance of FDM (1929) in the development of Bontempelli's anti-Fascist sentiment. This work preceded by several years his official break with Fascism in 1936, when he published an article against the political control of the arts and caesarianism in *La gazzetta del popolo*. An anti-Fascist sentiment had, however, in my view already been expressed in Bontempelli's works of magical realism FDM (1929) and *VM di Adria e dei suoi figli* (1930) (VM). These two novels deal with controversial topics that I believe refute some of Fascism's foremost principles, an appraisal that was disguised through deliberate acts of self-censorship. More precisely, it is through his deconstruction of mimetic writing that Bontempelli's critique of the regime comes into existence. The narrative strategies I deem instrumental to his self-censorship (e.g. authorial reticence, metaphor, mythopoesis) reflect the poetics of magical realism in «its inherent transgressive and subversive qualities» which, Bowers maintains, «are hinted at in the term itself» (2004: 63). This is evident, namely, in the choice to bring together two allegedly incompatible literary modes.

Hegerfeldt (2005: 52) points out that exploring magical realism inevitably leads to analysing its departure from notions of realism, hence its challenge of literary tradition. For this reason, it is considered suited to transgressing ontological, political, or geographical boundaries (Zamora & Faris 1995: 5).

In Bontempelli's hands, the challenge to "realism" was put to further use as a critical response to the avant-garde, standing against the movement's formal radicalism while conceptualising the role for the artist in the new era. In his view, and in line with Fascist criteria, this role amounts to that of the mythographer: as Cesaretti observes (2009: 387), the fascist inclination towards myth-making was initially appealing to Bontempelli. Yet late in the 1920s, in his mystifying realism, magic acts as both a tool for concealing his convictions – a tool for self-censorship – and as the very means by which this counter-ideology can be generated.

In order to expand on these points, I first illustrate Bontempelli's controversial relationship with the Regime, especially within the experience of his journal *900*. I then provide an overview of Fascist censorship and identify the role of self-censorship in Bontempelli's novels. Finally, I analyse *FDM* and *VM* to illustrate how, by decoding the above-mentioned narrative strategies of self-censorship, we can detect Bontempelli's appraisal of Fascist ideology.

2. *900* and Fascist Censorship

In "Personali ma non troppo" (1929), Bontempelli explained that his old adhesion to Fascism derived from his consideration of it as «a forthright political primitivism, after those consumed experiences of past politics that had preceded it» (1974: 187–188).¹ In its early days, «Fascism appeared to him to be a hybrid movement with a potential for conservative innovation» (Jewell 2007: 287).

¹ All translations from *L'avventura novecentista* (1974) and of quotes originally published in Italian are mine.

Yet while he initially supported the Fascist enterprise, Bontempelli's position was never clear-cut. The events involving *900*, its ambivalent orientation, somehow reflects his own.

For its Italian and simultaneously European character, *900* was accused of internationalism in Italy, and of Fascism abroad. The journal's image, and Bontempelli's position as an intellectual, was thus moved by two contrasting necessities. On the one hand, European avant-gardes, which were a source of inspiration for *900*, looked at Fascism adversely (Stagniti 2005: 279). Thus, on the international front, Bontempelli insisted on the "independent" character of the journal in a letter dated 1926: «*900* does not deal with politics» (1974: 117);² specifying that some of the Italian contributors belonged to the opposition (e.g. Corrado Alvaro and Emilio Cecchi). On the other, Bontempelli needed the Duce's approval. To this end, he appealed to the Regime's desire for cultural expansion, and for a literary experience that would counteract foreign influences (Stagniti 2005: 279). Therefore, keen to avoid accusations of antinationalism, Bontempelli made a number of declarations. These included the following, in the first issue of *900*: «The moment we strive to be Europeans, we end up feeling desperately Romans» (1974: 12). Hence in his journal – partly out of necessity and partly because of his initial beliefs – Bontempelli celebrated «the march on Rome and the use of the club» (Airoldi-Namer 1975: 251).

Yet, despite Bontempelli's appeal to Mussolini's need for a Fascist cultural distinctiveness, when it came to the relationship between artistic creation and politics he continued to advocate that no form of

² However, political pressure led Bontempelli to change its character drastically. After the 1927 Autumn volume, featuring the short story "Le Cafe Florian" by Itja Grigorevic Erenburg (where the Russian was ironical about the black shirts), the Regime withdrew its approval. On 1st July 1928 the journal was published monthly in Italian, and the 'Comitato di Redazione Internazionale' was suppressed. The space dedicated to literature was reduced and a section on politics was created, managed by journalist Giulio Santangelo. The last issue of the journal appeared on 21st June 1929.

art should be reduced to propaganda. In "Mendicità" (1928), for instance, he asserted that «literature has to offer collaboration to the Authority, rather than ask for protection» (Bontempelli 1974: 115).

Bontempelli's controversial stance in the late-1920s is further problematised by his fictional works. As Artieri (1978: 41) claims, his predilection for female heroines in his 'realismo magico' was in stark contrast to his celebration of «the hero of the myth [...] the action man» of Fascist inspiration in *900* – as part of what Airoidi-Namer terms the «banal mythology of the Regime» (1975: 267). Where «certain questions that were [...] pertinent to masculinity» were concerned, Mussolini's aim was to pursue a continuity with the past (Bellassai 2005: 315). Fascism celebrated traditions that entailed female inferiority. As I will show, in *FDM* and *VM*, Bontempelli considers this precept to be a symptom of the rigid traditionalism, and ensuing homogenisation, enforced by the Regime. Thus, as with many early texts of magical realism, he employs imagination as a metaphor (a tool of self-censorship) to convey his criticism (see Faris 2004: 169). More specifically, he addressed the totalizing character of Fascism, which led to its progressive intervention in all aspects of Italians' private and public lives – especially its intrusion in the arts. In "Protezione" (1936), he would in fact claim: «For a few years now, arts are wanted to become an instrument of declared political propaganda» (Bontempelli 1974: 117). In "Le rane chiedono tanti re" (1938), he also asserts: «I'd rather have my pen removed from my hand than having somebody at my back while I'm writing » (*Ibid.*: 216).

Bontempelli's increasingly intolerant attitude led to his being sentenced to death during the *R.S.I.* – a condemnation that he managed to avoid. Yet before he openly dissented from Fascism, Bontempelli had voiced his dissatisfaction with some aspects of it. However, in order to avoid censorship, he did so vicariously. This position was not uncommon among writers and artists in general during the 'ventennio fascista'.

2.1 A 'Letteratura del (dis)impegno'?

As argued by Bonsaver, during the early stages of Fascism, censorship mostly addressed the press, rather than books. These were targeted only from 1931, and in 1932 censorship began to be systematized, with the first collection of national data. So, if «in the early years of the regime, Fascist censorship was far from being an all-pervading and systematic process», from the early 1930s more consideration was paid to what was or was not suitable material for publication and the first «implicit pre-publication censorship» began to be operative in 1934 (Bonsaver 2007: 90 and 104).

Although publishing houses had a certain amount of freedom before 1934, they were nonetheless asked to self-regulate and books could be requisitioned even after their publication – with potential catastrophic consequences for publishers, who were thus very careful not to accept anything the censors might disapprove, and complied with censorship officially applied to other fields, such as the press. Censorship was especially harsh where the figure of the Duce, war, and the *patria* were concerned. Celebrations of individualism were also targeted, in that they opposed the supreme principle of Fascist ideology: the supremacy of the State. Later, regulatory concerns also focussed on any negative comment towards motherhood and the demographic battle. Novels and short-stories were regularly sequestered, and altered, often to the detriment of authorship itself (Ben-Ghiat 2000: 84).

Fascist censorship became all the more powerful with the interior censorship that supplemented it. Self-censorship was part of the subtle Fascist strategy of control that had already proven efficient with the kind of self-regulatory censorship implemented by publishing houses. This was possibly the most effective method as it relied on the interiorisation of the censor's official view (see Bonsaver & Gordon 2005). Instead of wasting time on works that would never be published unless heavily altered, authors either preferred to comply with the authorities' requirements, or chose to focus on politically neutral topics: they preferred a 'letteratura del disimpegno'. Or, as was the case

with Moravia's *Gli indifferenti* (1929), others sought narrative strategies to protect their works. In their case, there was no implicit acceptance of, or identification with, the censor's views, but they privileged a narrative style which demanded the creation of complex systems of reading and writing, practicing for their survival a sort of literary self-censorship. This is the case, I claim, with Bontempelli's novels *FDM* and *VM*, where self-censorship became a method of maintaining the ideological scope of his writings whilst avoiding censorship.

In these works, Bontempelli tackles delicate issues, such as the notion of motherhood, and individualism as opposed to homogenisation. Baldacci (1959: 438) goes so far as to assert that, in *FDM* Bontempelli is acting as a critic of his society. When he published it, Fascist censorship had not yet become a systematic machine of repression, but a proper evaluation of Bontempelli's oeuvre was prevented by his narrative style. As Bonsaver has claimed (2007: 151), despite their problematic content, «Bontempelli's surreal settings kept his narrative work away from controversy». His novels were overlooked by the Regime because of their «"dream" element, the apparent representative rarefaction» (Baldacci 1959: 438). They were deemed far from any political, or intellectually critical, engagement – even by a number of contemporary critics. Ugnani (1991: 8) claims, for instance, that Bontempelli's works strive to stay away from politics. According to Airoidi-Namer (1975: 251) Bontempelli shows a cultural disengagement in his fictional works. These statements may hold true to a certain extent, considering that, of his vast output, few works can possibly be defined as being anti-Fascist. Yet as Cesaretti rightly observes, such a perspective «facilitates the task of those [...] who have to deal with the [...] ambiguities of [Bontempelli's] political position from the mid twenties to the late thirties» (2009: 387).

Bontempelli deliberately disguised his ideology within elements of 'realismo magico'. The narrative elements he employed are indeed varied and cannot be examined in one article only. However, it is the elements of authorial reticence, metaphor and mythopoesis, along with other interconnected strategies, that more cogently contributed to the dissemination of his convictions within his narratives, as well as their

simultaneous disguise. In Bontempelli, self-censorship was not simply repressive and a marker of his nicodenism, but productive, too.

3. Authorial Reticence and the Irreducible Element

Cesaretti (2009) individuates Bontempelli's appraisal of Fascism in his 1937 novel *Gente nel Tempo* (*GT*), the third book of his 'realismo magico' trilogy. In Galateria's opinion, *GT*, *FDM* and *VM*, share many common features. First of all, an element of self-censorship, that is, their setting during the first years of the century, a "neutral" period with respect to Fascism (2005: 175). That is, he privileges an anti-mimetic temporal choice.

In the trilogy, Bontempelli draws the reader's attention to the mystery element, which he maintains throughout by authorial reticence. This is the «withholding of information and explanations» (Chanady 1985: 126). Chanady explains that «one of the factors that distinguishes stories of the fantastic from magico-realist narratives [...] is the absence of essential information about certain occurrences within the fictitious world» (1985: 135).³ Through authorial reticence, Bontempelli could lure his readers to interpret his novels – more specifically, the meaning of their irreducible element – by leaving "clues" to be deciphered. This is evidenced by intertextual references,

³ As claimed by Taravacci (1980: 232), the adventurous spirit that Bontempelli seeks in his 'realismo magico' novels fundamentally rejects the indispensable element of building hesitation (between the natural and the supernatural). This is a characteristic of the fantastic-uncanny, as theorised by Todorov "for events that are initially perceived [...] as manifestations of the supernatural but which, in the end, have a rational explanation" (Henn 2005: 106–107). Due to space-related constraints, I will not be able to offer an exegesis of Bontempelli's 'realismo magico' in its connection with the fantastic, and will thus refer solely – for the sake of coherence – to works of literary criticism that deal with magical realism. For a study of the differences between magical realism and other neighbouring narrative styles see Bowers 2004, Slemon 1995, and Warnes 2005.

many of which are borrowed from Christianity, and Greek mythology and would be comprehensible to a large readership

As mentioned above, Baldacci (1959: 433) has observed that Bontempelli's social critique is partly overshadowed by his focussing on the 'mistero', what in magical realist terms is referred to as the "irreducible element". Faris has theorised this as «something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe [...], that is, according to logic, familiar knowledge, or received belief» (2004: 7). The irreducible element is a magical event that is to be accepted as such, within ordinary life. The "irreducible element" is «unexplainable according to the laws of [...] modern, post-enlightenment empiricism» (Faris 2002: 102). In Bontempelli's 'realismo magico' trilogy, the irreducible element is always connected with a sensitive topic frowned upon by censorship, namely, motherhood. In *FDM* the irreducible element concerns two mothers and a child. Luciana, one of the two mothers, loses her son Ramiro to a fatal illness when he is seven years old. Seven years later, on the anniversary of Ramiro's death, another child – Mario, the son of Arianna and Mariano Parigi – is turning seven. Suddenly, however, his being 'Mario' simply disappears in his memory and consciousness, replaced by being 'Ramiro' as if he had just reincarnated. This creates a paradoxical situation, because, albeit at different moments, both Luciana and Arianna have given birth to Mario/Ramiro.

In *VM*, all members of the protagonist Adria's family die after she has left them for good, and is hiding in Paris. It is as though the lack of the maternal presence, the disappearance of this woman of unnatural beauty, were fatal to all those who had happened to love her.

GT similarly features the extinction of a family at the hands of a powerful maternal character, la 'Gran Vecchia'. Before dying, she triggers a legacy that condemns the members of her family to die young: «Nobody else will have to be born, [...] people like you who are good for nothing [...], it's best if the family ends here» (Bontempelli 2001: 15–16).⁴ And indeed they die, one after the other, at regular

⁴ Translation is mine.

intervals of five years. A plausible explanation for these events is not given, and their "irreducibility" is maintained.

The mythopoeic process at work within this novel has been analysed by Airoidi-Namer and Cesaretti. In their opinions, Bontempelli's thematisation of time finds its expression in the 'Gran Vecchia' as the «the maternal female incarnation of Kronos who devours his children » (Airoidi-Namer 1979: 122), an image that «lies at the imaginative core of the novel» (Cesaretti 2009: 388). Yet Cesaretti has also defined the 'Gran Vecchia' character as a female model of Mussolini; she is a «dictatorial, "Mussolinesque" [matriarch] characterised by a "mento potente"» (*Ibid.*: 386). He goes on to observe how this novel embodies Bontempelli's critique of the Regime, in that it exposes one of its most apparent paradoxes. On the one hand, Fascist pro-natalist policies encouraged procreation. On the other, the military campaigns and, more generally, Mussolini's imperialistic goals, demanded the lives of many soldiers. Thus, the image of the devouring 'Vecchia/Kronos' encapsulates this paradox: she who gave life is also the one that brings death to her progeny.

The irreducible element of the novel invites the reader to dig further into the text beyond the plot. At the same time, by maintaining authorial reticence about the impossible double motherhood, Adria's deadly beauty, and the 'Gran Vecchia's' power, Bontempelli challenges the assumption that everything is knowable and controllable, thereby establishing a foremost precept of magical realism. Namely, that

reality always exceeds our capacities to describe or understand or prove and that the function of literature is to engage this excessive reality, to honour that which we may grasp intuitively but never fully or finally define (Parkinson Zamora 1997: 77).

What we can "grasp" and "never fully define" amounts to the impossibility of encapsulating important aspects of human life within predetermined signifiers. On the one hand, the ensuing transfiguration of reality becomes a self-censoring process that enabled Bontempelli to avoid censorship. Primarily focussed on works that represented the

Italian situation realistically, this censorship paid little attention to writers who adopted fantastical, or magical settings (see Zangrandi 2011). On the other, Bontempelli was therefore able to convey his convictions by applying structures of the imaginary to the real, which became expressive of a new system of signs (Bianchi 1994: 88). In accordance with modernist experimentation, this «practice involved a move beyond the traditional mimetic paradigm» toward a poiesic one, which «implied a process of undermining of the notion itself of reality, in that it was perceived as an aesthetic construct» (Storchi 2006: 117). This is in line with Chanady's argument that magical realism is a «particularly successful manifestation of poiesis as opposed to mimesis» (1995: 126), since it employs the form of the real to produce the imaginative. Then, it should also be remembered that Bontempelli's ideal of the twentieth-century artist involved the concept of myth-making. Overall, Bontempelli's narrative attempts to surpass the dialectic relationship between the paradigms of reality and magic through mythopoesis: «Mythical narrative is immersed in the framework of everyday life, so as to give it a realistic reading». At the same time, «everyday experience was projected into a mythical temporality» (Storchi 2006: 118).

These narrative strategies are apparent in the 'realismo magico' works FDM and VM.

4. Metaphor and Mythopoesis

In a letter dated 5 August 1930, the Press Office communicated to Bontempelli the Duce's appreciation of VM.⁵ This is somewhat surprising, considering that the novel includes a suicide and a clear effacement of paternal authority. The novel reflects, in my view, the mythopoeic process as a tool for self-censorship, as this implies the author's reliance on the reader's interpretation triggering, as it were, a web of intertextual decoding. To this end, the interplay between metaphor and mythopoesis is crucial within Bontempelli's writings.

⁵ See Bonsaver 2007: 151.

Discussing the literary strategies adopted by dissenting writers writing under regimes of totalitarian powers, Borges famously claimed that «censorship is the mother of metaphor» (qtd. in Manea, 1992: 30): while the metaphor acts as the basis for the mythicizing process that partially hides the meaning of the novel, at the same time it comprises the author's meta-commentary.

In *FDM*, two crucial metaphors can be identified, which in turn engender a mythopoeic process. An opposition, between the two mothers and Mariano, Mario's father, underpins the whole novel at the level of plot. At the level of metaphor, this signifies the clash between imagination and rationalisation, a conflict that is essential to Bontempelli's conceptualisation of 'realismo magico': «The sole instrument of our work will be imagination» (1974: 9 [1927]).

In *FDM*, woman's generative power becomes a metaphor for the imagination, while man represents rationality, the obtuseness of excessive – institutional – regulation. This in turn engenders a mythopoeic process whereby motherhood is exalted in what Bosetti reads as a provocative elaboration of Christianity. At the same time, male authority is devalued as a result of another recurrent process in Bontempelli's works, namely, the devitalisation of the human being, who is reduced to an emotionally and intellectually inert puppet by conformism.

4.1 Metaphor and Mythopoesis in *FDM*

As mentioned above, authorial reticence is instrumental to the reader's understanding of the novel's underpinning principles: while it must simply be accepted that 'magic is real', as it is part of cogent reality, at the same time this magical event has precise ideological implications. To this end, Bontempelli disseminates clues in the form of intertextual references. Bosetti (1997: 134) accordingly claims that, in this novel, Bontempelli is playing with the «itinéraire christique», referring to Ramiro as the «enfant-Dieu». This was provocative on Bontempelli's part, because «the underlying ideology in most censorship decisions was that of the Catholic Church» (Thompson

1996: 101) – and here he was playing with a Christian dogma, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The novel also offers a depiction of the Virgin Mary.

In Baldacci's words (1959: 433), Bontempelli seems to «take pleasure in breaking or overturning a social convention», insofar as the novel is entirely underpinned by the question: «Is it true motherhood that of the flesh or that of the soul?». In *FDM*, «motherhood is monstrously exalted [...] until its doubling» (Airoldi-Namer 1979: 99). Arianna represents, on the one hand, the *mater dolorosa* of the Latin Hymns, the Virgin Mother who cries over the death of her son (Bosetti 2007). When she is in tears, Ramiro cries as well, and their faces, «close together beneath that storm of tears seemed mirror images of each other» (Bontempelli 2004a: 155). However, the wondrous child who «looked like one mother when he was crying», looked like the other, Luciana, «when he was smiling. And, in each case, with such a perfect resemblance that it defied imagination» (*Ibid.*). Therefore, expanding on Bosetti's decoding, it could be argued that in this novel we have a dual representation of the Virgin Mary, as is suggested by the reference to Luciana as the *mater speciosa* (the Virgin Mary rejoicing for Jesus's birth). Arianna's and Luciana's characters are brought together – as separate aspects of a split whole – to symbolise opposing facets of the Virgin Mary, and acquire a mythopoeic dimension. Their generative power, hence their imagination, is so powerful that it creates life by bringing it back from the dead. The foremost and provocative outcome of this mythicised motherhood is that it excludes paternal agency in the making of life. This is clearly conveyed at the level of plot by the fact that, in the days that follow Ramiro's "resurrection", the father Mariano is excluded from the family paradigm. Unable to come to terms with his family's predicament, or to have his voice heard by either of the two mothers, at a certain point in the novel Mariano even has Luciana hospitalised, in light of her alleged madness (she believes in the reincarnation of her child). In the asylum, when speaking to her doctor she asks what they intend to cure her from. The answer is «your imagination, dear signora» (Bontempelli 2004a: 106).

It has been argued that self-censorship can be based on a precise web of intertextual references directed at a specific readership. Bontempelli's focus on the notion of the "imagination" in *FDM* thus deserves further consideration. No reader of Bontempelli (a prominent intellectual and public figure at the time) could, in my view, have misunderstood the meaning of the above scene, remembering his conceptualisation of magical realism, as exemplified by the sentence «the sole instrument of our work will be imagination». In Fascist times and after he had been forced to close his journal, such a sentence could not but convey his resistance to «the idea that specific political formulations should dictate any literary themes and styles» (Jewell 2007: 287). Thus whilst the mythopoeic process in *FDM* exalts motherhood and creates the magical ambience of the novel, the metaphor at the basis of this mythicisation – motherhood as imagination – itself constitutes an authorial comment against the Fascist control of artistic creation. This is all the more evident because the above scene is staged in an asylum, another element whose importance could hardly escape attentive readers of the time. The label of "madness" was a powerful instrument of control for the Regime (see Battifora 2008). This might in fact be considered to be the ultimate censorship (the word madness, or variations of it, is repeated many times in the novel, always in connection with the double motherhood and the child's "resurrection") – a definitive way to silence dangerous, unruly, voices. Luciana's institutionalisation should thus be read in light of Chanady's claim that: Magical realism «expresses [...] points of view, often related to marginality and subalternity». It «gives free reign to the imagination while critically reflecting on the ailments of society and the predicament of the human condition» (2003: 442). By decoding the complex web of metaphorical references, Bontempelli's representation of double motherhood comes to symbolise a challenge to Fascist ideology as he gives voice to "subaltern" subjects – women.

This is reinforced by a devaluation of paternal authority, which encapsulates Mariano's metaphorical meaning. More precisely, he may be said to belong to a specific set of characters, which are recurrent in Bontempelli's publications even before the trilogy – his automata.

Staging the affectation of social conventions and human beings' enslavement to them, Bontempelli describes in his writings a process of devitalisation of the human being that engenders the creation of the marionette/mannequin (Fresu 2008: 23). Having testified in the early 1920s to Bontempelli's interest in and own adherence to a Pirandellian theory of identity, in the late 1920s, the automaton – through the figures of both Mariano and Adria (*VM*) – becomes a narrative device that reveals his concern with a politically-engendered conformism.

5. The Marionette as Metaphor

Bontempelli's use of the marionette as a metaphor reflects the magical realist predilection for crossing boundaries: the metaphor joins together categories of being that cannot in reality be connected, thus presenting us with ontological riddles. As a device of magical realism, the marionette can be said to pertain to what Delbaere-Garant calls "grotesque realism", which she defines as «a hyperbolic distortion that creates a sense of strangeness through the confusion [...] of different realms like animate/inanimate or human/animal», and precisely «between puppet and human» (2005: 256).

In the pre-magical realism plays *Nostra Dea* (1925) and the 1927 *Minnie la candida* (the latter possibly being Bontempelli's starkest critique of the bourgeois, and fascist, society of the time) the image of the «theatre of mechanical marionettes» is a metaphor for a mechanised humanity, for an inversion of meaning that transforms heroes into automata (Mazzacurati 1987: 230). In *Minnie, la candida*, Bontempelli's concern with standardisation is overt (Piscopo 2001: 347–348). Airoidi Namer (1979: 166) argues that this story epitomises the nightmare of losing one's humanity, the total peril of alienation incumbent on society of Bontempelli's time. In Fabbri's words, the immobile Dea – a woman-mannequin, with a grotesque body in-between two ontological states (inanimate and animated) – is one of Bontempelli's «objectual characters, lacking both psychological and kinetic expressivity» (2005: 443), construed through the language of grotesque realism.

In *FDM*, Bontempelli represents the marionette Mariano within the paradigm of reality. Unlike Dea, Mariano is a full-fledged human, an ordinary man with no exceptional characteristics, and this is precisely what makes him a marionette. The fact that Mariano, too, represents a variation of the Bontempellian automaton is also signified by his name. Fresu (2008: 72) detects a predilection for male names with the route 'mar-' in *FDM*, which she interprets in light of a semantic implication with marionette, deriving from the old French 'maryonete'. This is therefore a direct reference to Bontempelli's concern with sameness and conformism: Mariano is a human variant of the automata that Fabbri (2005: 444) has defined as grotesque characters – humans with no biological pulse.

While in *FDM* the magical ambience that allows for self-censorship is established through the mythicisation of motherhood, it is «irony [that] informs the implicit inversion in the roles of humans and marionettes» (Segel 1995: 287). Irony is accompanied by simple, realistic language, which reproduces the bourgeois setting of early twentieth-century Rome. The Parigis, an ordinary young middle-class family (Bontempelli 2004a: 19), live in «one of those modern houses resembling villas that make up this most elegant quarter of the Empire City». Mariano «Parigi, the paterfamilias, is forty» (*Ibid.*). With subtle irony, Bontempelli depicts an urbanised bourgeois man who provides well for himself and his family, and who is «the recipient of those honors by which our society encourages its most industrious members» (*Ibid.*). Mariano is «a man little known to history, but one who plays a somewhat important role in life – assuming it is important to earn a great deal of money annually dealing in weighty matters» (*Ibid.*).

Irony, on the one hand, brings the situation onto the level of parody. In 1926 Bontempelli explains that

it is a way to distance oneself from contingent reality, to set free from an excessive adherence to the surface of things. It paves the way for a superior form of lucidity, a legitimate transition from

the conception of the artwork as subject to that of the artwork as object. (1974: 15)

Irony is thus a phase, a moment in the process of representing the ordinary world as a miracle. As a tool of self-censorship, it both plays with meanings and obscures them (the reader, as is the case with metaphor, does not know the level of attainability). Here, it does so by mocking Mariano's regulated life and also his manners – «but Mariano Parigi, the man of action, took control of the situation» (Bontempelli 2004a: 28). Mariano, like his attorney, tries to label and reduce things to a signifier of a knowable nature. The two of them «failed to see the absurdity of using juridical means to resolve a situation that had nothing in the least bit juridical about it» (*Ibid.*: 99). Accordingly, Mariano is a metaphor for what Bontempelli calls «the bourgeois spirit» (1974: 85), just as the two mothers represent imagination: «The bourgeois spirit is when imagination [...] surrenders to pure intellect and abstract rules» (*Ibid.*: 85).

The male grown-ups in the story all represent a different institution, each failing to simply accept the double maternity and attempting to seek a rational explanation for it: Mariano represents the Family, Luciana's lawyer Massimiliano the Law, and the physician the Asylum. According to Faris, magical realist texts «are often written in the context of cultural crises, almost as if their magic is invoked when recourse to other, rational, methods failed» (2004: 83). Marguerite Alexander (qtd. in Bowers 2004: 51) calls the literally enactment of metaphor in the narrative «the magic realization of metaphor». In *FDM*, Bontempelli's conceptualisation of 'realismo magico' appears to endorse this as the metaphor is literalised: the very process of magic being evoked against the failure of (institutional) rationalisation becomes an element of the plot. It is worth remembering here that, through the many institutions it created, the Fascist State came to influence every aspect of national life, including all its economic, political and even spiritual forces. The emergence of magic in *FDM* therefore has a similar function to that of the Latin American 'marvellous real', namely, that of signalling the dangers of an

institutionalised conformism, which reduces man to a powerless puppet.

5.1 The Life and Death of a Wilful Mannequin

VM presents another re-elaboration of a Greek myth, namely that of Narcissus. Once more, Bontempelli explores the deadly power of an authoritative maternal figure, and the effacement of male authority (which is already implied in the title, in which Adria's husband does not appear). This novel also contains a suicide; another topic frowned upon by censorship. These sensitive issues are disguised within a magical atmosphere through the irreducible element, Adria's quasi-supernatural beauty, whose metaphorical meaning emerges within the mythopoeic process.

As an elaboration of the myth of Narcissus (Micali 2002: 102), Adria's reflected image conveys her duality, which is also implied in her name. This derives from Adriana, the female version of Janus, the two-faced god (as with Mariano, allusions to a mythical world are made through use of a specific name, Fresu 2008). In line with this duality, two seemingly incompatible aspects define Adria's character: beautiful but unreal like «a dark-haired angels among mortals» (Bontempelli 2004b: 196), she is one of Bontempelli's automata. Yet she belongs to the 'reality' side of the narrative – like Mariano, but more ambiguously. She is a New Narcissus, and thus a character described through a language rich in rhetoric devices, an epistemological magical realism.⁶ But Adria is also a human being. This is evidenced, for instance, by her obsession with ageing. When at the age of thirty she spots the first wrinkles on her face, she decides to leave for good, for

⁶ Weisgerber (1987: 27 and 28) explains an alleged difference between two main forms of magical realism: a "scholarly" domain of mainly European writers (or "epistemological"), which creates a hypothetical universe, and the folkloric, mythic form, principally established in Latin America (though geographical distinctions have been broadened since Faris and Zamora's 1995 collection).

«nobody must be witness [...] to my decline» (Bontempelli 2004b: 228). For Adria, the prospect of revealing her aged face to the world is unbearable, for this would show that she is, after all, only human. She even burns alive to preserve her extraordinariness.

In this light, it must be remembered that Bontempelli (1974: 189 and 191) introduced the novel in *La gazzetta del popolo* by explaining how, while in *FDM* "magic" still derived from "the Above", with *VM* he wanted to achieve, stylistically, that which he considered to be the main task of 'realismo magico': in his own words, to create «mystery and miracle [that] come from within». Thus the supernatural character of Adria's beauty is a linguistic manipulation of reality. This is achieved narratively through the observer's vision (e.g. all the people that marvel at her, such as her children and husband), and linguistically, through a language rich in metaphors and many hyperbolic descriptions. On the level of meaning, once more, magic (here, in epistemological form) holds the key to Bontempelli's beliefs.

Micali compares her character to Dea from *Nostra Dea*:

Like Dea, also Adria must be created day by day, [...] but [...] Adria is [...] moved by a very strong will, thanks to which [...] she herself provides to the daily making of her-self. (1996: 61)

Dea chooses her garments, her Pirandellian mask, according to her environment (Somigli 1994–1995: 35), whilst Adria's "devitalisation" derives from her strong will. She chooses how to create herself on a daily basis, thereby escaping all permanent categorisations and social dictates, either as a mother or as a wife. Thus the theme of the double here engenders a sense of possibility, whereby Adria can imagine and create herself in limitless ways and thereby avoid complying with any rigid visions of femininity. In this sense, Adria's beauty – which she pursues to the detriment of social requirements – is a metaphor for freedom that finds narrative representation in the making of an indefinable female identity.

Fascism offered women a sense of belonging to something larger than their own lives. This was supported by a carefully studied official

iconography that exalted the roles of wife and mother, who were said to have a fundamental place in the life of the Nation. In this sense, Adria also challenges the self-abnegating 'dark mother' celebrated by the Regime. She is, paradoxically, self-abnegating but for her individualism, not for her children, whose lives are «marked negatively by their mother's existence» (Gubert 2000: 5). Furthermore, after Adria has left the house, this becomes «an altar without a Cross – desecrated remains» (Bontempelli 2004b: 241). «The husband, housekeeper with no more purposes left» (Micali 1996: 3) dies shortly afterwards. Her suitor Guarniero's obsession soon turns into homicidal madness, and he ends up in an institution. As Micali (1996: 62) explains, in these characters' contact with Adria, we are presented with a clash between normal-traditional and abnormal-modern, where the latter acts as a catalyst that amplifies the contradictions and incongruities of the former, leading it to "explode". This is in line with Živković's definition of the double, as it «traces [...] that which has been silenced, made invisible» (2000: 126). What Adria has exposed, or made visible, is an extraordinary beauty that, by means of her exceptional willpower, has enabled her to escape conformism. In so doing, she has forced others to confront their own ordinariness: «Bontempelli asserts [...] the superiority of a scintillating idealism over the conventionality and the dull monotony of life, [...] understood as a programmed routine that imprisons humanity» (Fontanella 2007: v). With this character (and with Mariano), Bontempelli expressed his growing disaffection with Fascist ideology and, more precisely, with the «devitalisation of the human being» (Fresu 2008: 23) by that same doctrine, which would soon invade and drain «all the layers of our lives» (Bontempelli, qtd. in Baldacci 1978b: 949).

To conclude, Bontempelli's strategies of self-censorship in his 'realismo magico' serve a dual function, namely, both to convey and to disguise his critique of Fascism. While each literary choice has precise implications and outcomes, on a macro-level the preference for anti-mimetic writing can also be seen to challenge Fascist censorship, which was mostly restricted to realistic representations. Somewhat ironically, 'realismo magico' was deemed inoffensive.

Bontempelli's detachment from 'reality' occurs through the mythopoeic power of literature and a number of other techniques (such as authorial reticence and irony). These invite the reader to engage in a deeper reading through the dissemination of clues in the form of allusions to mythology, the recurrence of first names, etc. Overall, keeping in mind Borges' stance, Bontempelli's self-censorship was the mother of a narrative style, his 'realismo magico'. Theorised in 1927, with *FDM* (1929) and *VM* (1930), this later became a mature form of writing through which he could express his dissatisfaction with the Regime's increasingly censoring character.

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