

“Brief Reviews”

*Centuria: One Hundred Ouroboric Novels*

Giorgio Manganelli

Trans. Henry Martin

McPherson & Company

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by Jeff Bursey

In that semi-hallucinatory state between wakefulness and sleep, enjoyed on a beach or while Peter Mansbridge intones verbless sentences, images and incomplete vignettes are conjured that have a whimsical and tenuous connection with the real world. These images rarely can be remembered, and therefore go unshared. Reading *Centuria* is like seeing panel after panel of such visions, as Giorgio Manganelli (1922-1990) tells one hundred completely unpredictable tales that loop around to their beginning and contain, through what is implicit, far more than the page and a half allotted to each.

In the translator’s preface, Manganelli is quoted as describing the genesis of *Centuria*. He had oversize typing paper at hand, and viewed filling one side of a page as a formal constraint. His own preface delights in puffing up this accomplishment: “On closer scrutiny, the considerate reader will here discover everything required for a lifetime of bookbound readings...” This is entirely tongue in cheek, but a reader will find much to amuse, dismay, or provoke to thought, depending on the piece and her own disposition.

If she was to ask the point of Manganelli’s self-constraint, and the purpose of the finished work, the answer might well be, “Why not?” and “To entertain oneself seriously—and perhaps others.” *Centuria* offers many registers, from sublime and witty, to chilling, to offbeat. A figure that often recurs is that of a gentleman of yesteryear’s vintage, emerging from the recent past into a present that gets invented one sentence ahead of his perceptions. Some characters are lovers who were never truly in love, or who lately have ceased to be in love, or who think they could be in love, or who are in love with someone other than the person they are about to meet. Women don’t have much of a role here, while the men are alone, lonely, or destined for one of those ends.

At times the everyday world, even when wracked by civil war, proves inadequate. Ghosts, dragons, unicorns, nightmare animals, and the Flying Dutchman appear, as do fantastic scenarios of past and alternate worlds: dinosaurs fail to acknowledge the Celestial Beings, causing the slow extinction of both; statues mull over their existence; a sphere is born; humans are myths in the eyes of aliens. Manganelli’s imagination is unfettered by considerations of plausibility, and his skewed viewpoint is ironic and gloomy, nicely balancing the fizz and frothiness of his ideas.

The precise construction of his sentences is brought into English with an award-winning translation. Often there is a charming geniality. In novel 74, a chasm escorts a “calm and properly educated gentleman” on his walk. “He took a few steps, and the chasm moved along with him, offering him, as it were, its left, so the calm gentleman thought that it might be a female chasm.” “All things considered, he meditated, the impossibility of a love affair was a far better thing than the end of one,” reflects the man in novel 50 who has abandoned the idea of a love match. While what

happens to these characters can be seen as painful, generally there's wry amusement in the telling. Yet sometimes Manganelli's tone is chilling, as when he describes the tortuous intricacies of a relationship, or unexpectedly moving, with something like regret, when he comments, for example, on a city's decline in novel 90, which can evoke, for Canadian readers, the disappearance of fishing outposts, mining towns, and farming communities.

“The city is extremely poor. Its citizens quite some time ago abandoned all attempts to modify their condition, and live a solitary, excluded, taciturn existence... There is no true and proper work, but every so often a certain number of citizens are ordered to transport a few stones—three, five—from one street to the next... Study commissions came at first to visit the city, in order to grasp the mechanism of this incredible poverty. A circus was invited to come to the city, and for two days, free of charge, gave shows in the central square. Only one man attended: a deaf man who had the impression he was going to a religious funeral service. The rest of the city's inhabitants remained locked up in their homes, all intensely pained by that luxurious din. It can't be said that they were waiting for their own and their city's final demise; they obscurely knew that they were that demise.”

*Centuria* contains worlds, compressed into one and a half pages, which expand in the mind's eye. McPherson, an independent small publisher whose books are distributed here by Distacor, has also published Manganelli's *All the Errors* (1990), a book of short stories. Barely known to English readers, Manganelli is well treated by his publisher and by Henry Martin. I hope that with *Centuria* he'll gain an audience appreciative of his lively humour and precise phrasing.

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