

Giorgio Manganelli, *Centuria: cento piccoli romanzi fiume*, a cura di Paola Italia, con un saggio di Italo Calvino, Milano: Adelphi, 1995. Lire 35.000.

Manganelli (1922-1990) is one of the more experimental prose fiction writers in Italian. Like Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, which it resembles to some extent, *Centuria* first appeared in 1979. The present edition contains the "cento piccoli romanzi fiume" of the first, as well as 31 "altre centurie", of which 11 have not been published elsewhere, and seven texts which Manganelli originally discarded. It also contains an illuminating "Nota al testo" by Paola Italia, and the Introduction, previously unpublished in Italian, which Calvino wrote for the French translation of *Centuria*.

Italia describes *Centuria* as "cento libri condensati in un unico romanzo". I would not describe it as a "novel", inasmuch as the short fictions which comprise it are neither linked by a clearly defined *trama*, nor by shared protagonists. It is true, though, that the fictions

almost read like plot summaries, and Italia traces the concept of a one-volume “library of plot summaries” to an initiative undertaken in 1960 by Manganelli and Cesare Garboli, “Cento libri in ogni casa, che si proponeva di offrire ai lettori un panorama della letteratura degli ultimi due secoli attraverso cento libri scelti e schedati dai due scrittori”.

Calvino’s *Se una notte* likewise presents a “library” of ten *microromanzi*. In typical Calvino fashion, the *microromanzi* are inserted in a framework narrative, and *Se una notte* as a whole exhibits Calvino’s predilection for symmetry. In Calvino’s text, moreover, the structure is very clearly defined and explicated through internal comments in the text. These elements are absent from Manganelli’s text, which achieves coherence primarily through the formal unity of the fictions. Manganelli stated in 1979, “mi è venuta la tentazione di scrivere sequenze narrative che in ogni caso non superassero la misura di un foglio: è un po’ il mito del sonetto, cioè di una struttura rigida e vessatoria con la quale lo scrittore deve necessariamente misurarsi”. The concision and the *emblematicità* of the *Centuria*, which can be read as self-contained narrative units, call to mind some of Borges’ fictions. Some of the *romanzi fiume* can be described as parables, disconcertingly enigmatic like a parable by Kafka. An example is number 63, in which “Un illustre fabbricante di campane...assolutamente ateo” is commissioned to produce a bell “che...doveva servire per il Giudizio Universale, che era ormai imminente”.

Various thematic “blocks” can be identified in *Centuria*. Metaphysical issues constitute one such a “block”; another is the breakdown of human relationships. In general, the *Centuria* offers a bleak and strangely aseptic vision of human relationships, even taking into account that the story element, such as there is, is reduced to bare essentials, and only present basic patterns.

In conclusion, this new edition is a valuable addition to Manganelli scholarship. It should also help to render a complex and entertaining text more accessible to the general reader.

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