

GIORGIO MANGANELLI

Five from Centuria

Translated by Henry Martin

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Five

A man who had not killed anyone was sentenced to death for murder; he was said to have killed, for reasons of financial self-interest, a business partner whose private conduct he intended neither to explain nor to comment upon. All things considered, he could see it might easily have been his fate—since the person in question had been his partner—to receive a more opprobrious condemnation. The judges had even admitted evidence that he, the condemned man, had been ignobly swindled. In truth, even while having been certain of it, he had never attempted to determine if he had been swindled, or to what degree. He had mentally accepted the figure of two-thirds as a reasonable approximation. In actual fact, as he discovered at the trial, the fraud had been far smaller. In this sense, the trial had cheered him up; it had given him the certainty of his friend's having been a cheat, but to discover that he also had been timid and restrained had been profoundly moving. The man attempted to explain that he had been convinced of having been swindled of two-thirds, and all the same had never contemplated murder. How could he have killed for so small a wrong? It was useless; he heard it pronounced that his personality was flawed, and that he suffered from delusions of omnipotence. All the same, he was not insane even though, more than an inclination, he had a kind of love for insanity. He saw that the observation was

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not ungrounded. From that moment on, he made no attempt to defend himself in any rational or properly argued way. For it to have been his lot—a man mild-mannered to the point of slothfulness—to end up in court, accused of homicide, struck him as so wondrous and improbable as to lead him to conclude that he had realized one of his life's great themes: the achievement of an objective insanity, not only his own, but a structural insanity, in which everything is firmly interconnected, perfectly deducible, perfectly concluded. Delusions of omnipotence? He was truly omnipotent. Since he, the innocent party, had been held to be guilty of homicide, he, and he alone, was the cornerstone of the whole demented structure. What a difficult role: he could not lie, since finally he had found his way into a world of true reality; nor could he simulate madness without endangering the entirety of the edifice of madness. Considerable cunning would have to be brought to bear, and he was quite well-stocked.

Sixteen

The gentleman dressed in a linen suit, with loafers and short socks, looks at the clock. It is two minutes to eight. He is at home, seated, slightly uneasy, on the edge of a stiff and demanding chair. He is alone. In two minutes—by now no more than ninety seconds—he will have to begin. He got up a little early in order to be truly ready. He washed carefully, attentively urinated, patiently evacuated, meticulously shaved. All of his underwear is new, never worn before, and this suit was tailored more than a year ago for this morning. For a whole year he has not dared. He has frequently gotten up very early—in general, moreover, he’s an early riser—but at the moment when all preparations were completed and he took his place on the chair, his courage had always failed him. But now he is about to begin. Fifty seconds remain before eight o’clock. Properly speaking, there is absolutely nothing he must begin. From another point of view, he stands at the beginning of absolutely everything. In any case, there is nothing he must “do.” He must simply go from eight o’clock to nine o’clock. Nothing more: traverse the space of an hour, a space he has traversed innumerable times, but now he must traverse it as pure and simple time, nothing else, absolutely. Eight o’clock has already passed, by a little more than a minute. He is calm, but feels a slight tremor gather within his body. At the seventh minute, his heart begins little by little to accelerate. At

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the tenth minute, his throat begins to close, while his heart pulses at the brink of panic. With the fifteenth minute, his whole body douses itself in sweat, almost instantaneously; three minutes later, the saliva in his mouth begins to dry; his lips grow white. At the twenty-first minute, his teeth begin to chatter, as though he were laughing; his eyes dilate, their lids cease to beat. He feels his sphincter open, and all his body hairs erect, immobile in a chill. Suddenly, his heart slows, his vision clouds. At the twenty-fifth minute, a furious tremor shakes him through and through for twenty seconds; when it stops, his diaphragm begins to move: his diaphragm now grips his heart. Tears flow, though he does not cry. A roar deafens his ears. The gentleman dressed in a linen suit would like to explain, but the twenty-eighth minute deals him a blow on the temple, and he falls from the chair; upon striking the floor, absolutely without a sound, he disintegrates.

Thirty-five

That man is on his way to a woman with whom he does not think himself to be in love, while nonetheless fearing that he is in love with her. He is a cautious man, and therefore keeps careful watch on his feelings. He examines them one by one. None of them indicates enamorment, but continued examination, continued interrogation, imbues each with a coloring of guilt, which is not dissimilar to the blush of being in love.

That woman will open her door to him: she does not love him, and looks as well with great mistrust at every possibility of loving him. So, by way and even in spite of not loving him, she behaves like a woman who denies a love both to herself and to others. Both she and the man are subtle in the drawing of distinctions, and therefore are mistrustful of one another. All the same, they continue to seek each other out.

Their conversations are cultivated, and not untouched by a certain guarded passion. There can be no doubt that the subjects with which they concern themselves, and which here can be of no concern to us, fire them with authentic interest, abstract and mental. Both, in fact, are committed to their solid intellect: more robust in the woman, more volatile and capricious in the man. Both admit that the other is gifted with a rich and enjoyable communicativity; neither, perhaps, would know where to look for another, equally pertinent interlocutor. Their jealous custodianship of

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the severity of their feelings makes them tend toward intensely general discourse, acutely abstract, astringently ideal. They do not talk about people, they cite no living persons with whom they are both acquainted, they firmly avoid all reference to corporeal beings, as such.

They think it would be highly expedient to persist in these dead men's conversations, if it weren't for the problem of not being able to tell whether the dead know so much as no longer to have any need to converse, or whether being dead they are simply unable any longer to converse. When grazed by these sorts of thoughts, which they never communicate, they experience an ephemeral but not superficial anguish. They deeply love their conversations with one another. They love each other's voices, they love their argumentations, the doubts, the perplexities, the exceptions, the objections, the paradoxes, the syllogisms, the metaphors. With a bizarre, mental desperation, they think about a life that does not include the other's voice. And then, briefly, they fall into silence, since they direly mistrust, and will always mistrust, the vocality of the voice, that vain custodian of the purity of concepts.

Fifty-three

This is not a properly human place, in the sense that its inhabitants are not human beings, and that their notions concerning humans are vague, transmitted by ancient story-tellers, or invented by merchants, geographers, falsifiers of photographs. Many who possess a relatively higher level of culture do not believe in the existence of human beings. They say it's a question of an old and fairly silly superstition, and in truth the conviction that human beings exist is mainly current among the lower classes. Children, too, believe in the existence of human beings, with the result of there having arisen a dense body of fables which describe their protagonists as men. The actions of the humans in these fables are quaint and droll, but all the same in their own way sinister; the humans weave unreasonable though rational plots. But the most singular and vivacious industry to have been inspired by the tradition of tales about human beings is the making of masks and puppets. Finely crafted objects are produced and sold not only for the delight of the children, but also as ornaments for the homes and palaces, even of those who, having studied, do not believe in the existence of men. These masks and puppets cannot, of course, reproduce the features of human beings, which no one has ever seen, and which perhaps do not exist. Recourse must therefore be taken to the various tradi-

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tions, to old, absurd picture books, and finally to imagination. So the faces given to human beings always have holes through which to see, generally two, but randomly placed, one at the summit and one at the feet, or in the middle, which is to say in the midriff. Humans have an upper part which is circular or square in form, with at times another part attached to it, and members below for grasping and walking. From somewhere or other they emit sounds by way of which they communicate: and here the artists' imaginations take free rein. There are those who fashion trumpets that emerge in tufts from the humans' summits, or holes arranged as on flutes and ocarinas. For hearing, they have a kind of cartilaginous orifice, situated anywhere. Puppets that represent "sick" human beings are particularly popular, even though it is difficult to imagine diseases of the imaginary. Some are covered with boils, with sores, secreting vital fluids. They have cavities through which they cannot see; chipped flutes that emit no sounds; members that do not touch, that neither grasp nor ambulate. All the same, some suppose human beings to be immortal; they venerate those masks and puppets, and if they judge them imperfect or disrespectful, they reverently burn them.

Seventy-seven

In this city, everyone possesses something which is indispensable to someone else, without the possessor knowing what to do with it, or even knowing they possess it. All are aware of the lack of something entirely indispensable, but no one knows who has it, or if the person who has it knows they have it, or, in case they do know, if they might be willing to part with it. It also never happens, so far as anyone knows, that each of two persons possesses what's indispensable to the other, which would make, if indeed they recognized each other, for a fairly easy situation, reducible to an act of symmetrical exchange. So, the person in possession of something indispensable to someone else will find no advantage in giving it up unless this someone else is capable of finding what in turn is indispensable to the other. It follows that whoever truly desires what's indispensable to him or her must not so much, or must not only, search out the party in possession of what they find indispensable, but must also, or first of all, seek out the individual presumed to possess what's indispensable to the party in possession of what's indispensable to themselves. As a result, the city has seen the creation of a system of supplication, inquiry, research, investigation, and begging in which everyone is involved, but indirectly. It is legitimate to ask how a supplicant can expect to know what's indispensable to the individual who holds what's indispensable to the

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supplicant himself. In truth, there are no sure rules, but little by little there has taken shape a method of divination, or deduction, that approximately follows a course as follows: something is indispensable to me, but is not indispensable to the person in possession of it; now, if what is indispensable to me is useless to him, this means that he must be in need of something that's external to what's indispensable to me, and external as well to everything I possess, but in some way contiguous with both. So, some believe themselves to be able through a process of self-analysis to perceive what it is, at least approximately, that's indispensable to the other. But at this point, it's necessary to discover the person who possesses that indispensable thing, and who in turn would find it advantageous to give it up only if he in turn is furnished with what's indispensable to him. The problem would seem to be insoluble, but since it's a question of indispensable things, no one can abandon the search for solutions, and the search for the indispensable thing becomes finally in its own right indispensable, and it isn't entirely clear whether, in this city, one desires that it come to an end.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GIORGIO MANGANELLI was born in Milan in 1922, but lived most of his adult life in Rome, where he died in 1990. In the early 1960s he was a member of the avant-garde group “Gruppo ‘63,” which included Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, Gianfranco Baruchello, Antonio Porta, and others. After the appearance of *Hilarotragoedia* in 1964, he went on to publish a remarkable series of books—novels, essays, commentaries, anatomies, travel books, and short stories—in addition to becoming known to the general public as a prolific reviewer and commentator for newspapers and magazines. *Centuria* appeared in 1979 and was awarded that year’s Viareggio Prize, generally held to be Italy’s most prestigious literary award. His works have appeared in French, German, Spanish, Dutch, Danish, Greek, Polish, Bohemian, Serbo-Croatian, and Hungarian. *Centuria*—coming after our publication in 1990 of *All the Errors*—is his second book to appear in English translation.

Centuria, <https://tinyurl.com/vythx5b>

All the Errors, <https://tinyurl.com/u8r6l6s>