FLORIAN MUSSGNUG

THE ELOQUENCE OF GHOSTS

Giorgio Manganelli and the Afterlife of the Avant-Garde

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Giorgio Manganelli (1922–1990), one of Italy's most radical and original writers, went further than most in exploring the creative possibilities of hybrid genres and open forms. Ostentation, theatricality, and a love of drapery and verbal excess are defining features of his body of work, which ranges from prose fiction, literary criticism, and drama to travel writing, treatises, commentaries, and imaginary interviews.

This study examines the wealth of Manganelli's imagination – his grotesque animals, speaking corpses, and melancholy spectres – and argues that his spectacular eloquence was shaped by an exceptional awareness of literary and philosophical models. Following Manganelli's lead, the author addresses issues such as the boundaries of meaningful language, the relationship between literary and visual texts, fantasy and realism, and the power of literature to express the apprehensions and intimations of human consciousness.

Florian Mussgnug is Lecturer in Italian Literature at University College London. His publications include *Lutero e la riforma protestante* (2003), *Folly: Special Issue of Comparative Critical Studies* (2008, co-edited with Lucia Boldrini), and *Postmodern Impegno: Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture* (2009, co-edited with Pierpaolo Antonello), as well as articles on twentieth-century Italian literature, philosophy of language, and literary theory. He is co-editor of Contemporanea and a member of the executive committee of the British Comparative Literature Association.

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For my parents

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In un mondo senza fantasmi mi pare difficile vivere
— GIORGIO MANGANELLI, *UFO e altri oggetti non identificati*

Introduction

> Eloquence is simply the end of art, and thus its essence.
>
> — KENNETH BURKE[1]

"La letteratura italiana ha uno scrittore che non assomiglia a nessun altro, inconfondibile e irresistibile nel gioco del linguaggio e delle idee", writes Italo Calvino in 1985.[2] Indeed, it would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to find among Giorgio Manganelli's contemporaries an author who matches his ostentation, his theatricality, his love of drapery and verbal excess. For Manganelli, delight in the play of words is not a choice but a necessity, a simple fact of nature. As he remarks in his poetic manifesto *La letteratura come menzogna*, eloquence is like a cloak that has become a second skin: "Come il mandrillo non può mortificare la retorica delle sue chiappe policrome, così non potremo toglierci di dosso, deliziosa maledizione, questo pieghevole vello di verbi".[3] Manganelli's critical writings on literature, too, are part of this indispensable costume. Few modern writers are as suspicious of the near nakedness of realism, as fascinated as Manganelli by the splendour of clothed words. "Chi ha conosciuto un negromante, un litigioso defunto, una aiuola di salamandre", he notes, "non li cederà in cambio di un patetico adolescente, o di un esangue ed eccitato uomo di lettere, o di un frustrato oggidiano".[4]

Born in Milan in 1922, Giorgio Manganelli first achieved literary fame in 1964, amidst the creative turmoil of *Gruppo 63*, Italy's self-proclaimed

1 Burke 1968, p. 41.
2 Calvino 1985, p. 9.
3 Manganelli 1967, p. 216.
4 Manganelli 1967, p. 56.

literary and artistic avant-garde. Reacting to the rather pedestrian achievements of a previous generation of post-war realist writers, these angry young men of Italian letters gathered their forces in the name of radical cultural innovation. Manganelli, a professor of English literature and avid reader of Laurence Sterne, William Butler Yeats, and Lewis Carroll, never quite seemed to fit the milieu. Nor could he be trusted to follow the group's rallying cries to unmask repressive social conventions. While many *neoavanguardisti* hoped that their radical experiments would emancipate readers from the indoctrination of politics and the market – one of the group's bright, young theoreticians, Umberto Eco, described writing as "semiotic guerrilla warfare" – Manganelli called literature a fraud, the writer a fool and the pursuit of social justice an embarrassing humanist *cliché*. Paradoxically, such ironic displays of misanthropic erudition earned Manganelli increasing respect as the tide of experimental literature faltered. While other members of *Gruppo 63* turned their attention to previously shunned forms of realism, Manganelli upheld the belief that true literature could only flourish at the margins. For nearly three decades and in more than twenty volumes, he explored the creative possibilities of hybrid genres and open forms: treatises, pamphlets, meta- and micronarratives, monologues, commentaries, and imaginary interviews. Since his death in 1990, six posthumous volumes of prose fiction, drama and poetry, and over twenty collections of essays, literary criticism and travel writing have been published.

This book examines the extraordinary wealth of Manganelli's imagination – his grotesque animals, speaking corpses and melancholy spectres – and argues that the author's spectacular eloquence was shaped by a strong interest in philosophy. Many scholars of Italian literature would disagree. Since the mid-1960s, Manganelli's provocative style and ironic self-portraits have been considered the only legitimate key for a critical assessment of his works. As a result, Manganelli has been read as a solitary eccentric: the inventor of an anachronistic, self-referential language, which marks an impasse or, at worst, a dead end in the development of Italian fictional narrative. There is some truth in this assumption. Words have for Manganelli an extraordinary, almost physical presence. They are the building blocks of his imagination, or rather its dancing bodies, banging against each other, flying apart from each other, filled with violent

and contradictory impulses. "Nel corpo della proposizione", he writes, "le parole si dispongono con disordinato rigore, come astratti danzatori cerimoniali".[5] But this extraordinary analogy contains only half the truth. Manganelli, a great, relentless critic of humanism, was not indifferent to the metaphysician's search for a real order behind appearances. Clarity ("chiarezza") according to Manganelli, is not a synonym of transparency ("limpidezza"), but its opposite: "La limpidezza mimava una arguta ingenuità, presupponeva una pagina unidimensionale, liscia, ignara di anfratti, trasparente; ma la rivelazione della chiarezza era tutt'altra: la capacità, la vocazione fatale a vedere per l'appunto ciò che sta oltre, accanto, attorno, dietro alla pagina".[6] What motivates Manganelli's writing, in other words, is a desire to make the "linguistic universe" completely visible, to stand outside the world and see the whole of it. Without this secret longing, Manganelli's concern with the avant-garde and his involvement with *Gruppo 63* would remain inexplicable. As I suggest in Chapter One, Manganelli's was fascinated by *neoavanguardia*'s self-assured proclamations of absolute rupture, but remained sceptical about its ambition to promote social and political progress. Avant-garde literature, according to Manganelli, reveals the ambiguities and contradictions within *any* language; it must therefore extend its challenge beyond specific ideologies, to every possible set of social and artistic conventions.

Pungent remarks about philosophy's eagerness to discipline and educate, to transform literature into a harmless and edifying pastime, can be found in many of Manganelli's earliest essays. Despite his evident dislike for moral philosophy, however, Manganelli never rejected his early insight – first articulated in his private notebooks of the 1950s – that philosophy is not only literature's rival and antagonist, but also a close relative and therefore by necessity a privileged interlocutor. Chapter Two takes a closer look at Manganelli's *Appunti critici* (1948–1956), where philosophy is described as an ideal, but inaccessible domain, and theoretical speculation as a private effort to exorcise – or at least to hold off – the ghosts of anxiety and fear.

5 Manganelli 1967, p. 222.
6 Manganelli 1989, p. 163.

"Il concetto sorge dove è possibile eliminare l'angoscia", writes Manganelli, "anzi è appunto il simbolo dell'angoscia superata. Ecco quindi la disperata lotta per collocare concetti dove è il disordine ossessivo dell'angoscia".[7] For the future writer, philosophical clarity and the unresolved longing of literature are radically different but intertwined forces, whose encounter opens a lasting field of creative tension.

Which philosophical models impressed themselves most deeply on Manganelli's language and thought? And how conscious was he of these models? Chapter Three draws attention to important similarities between Manganelli's critical work of the 1960s and the theoretical writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Roland Barthes. Articles such as "Un luogo è un linguaggio" (1966) and "La semantica di Humpty Dumpty" (1967) do not only recall Wittgenstein's analysis of language as a social rite, they also bring to mind his well-known comparison between language and game-playing. Similarly to Wittgenstein and Barthes, Manganelli starts from the assumption that every cultural practice may be viewed as a self-contained and internally coherent sign-systems, a "linguistic universe". This does not mean, however, that Manganelli's literary writings should be treated as a mere illustration of theoretical beliefs. While Chapter Three underlines the importance of philosophical models, Chapter Four reminds us that it would be simplistic to read a text only in terms of its author's philosophical intentions. This is particularly evident when it comes to Manganelli's repudiation of realism and "readability" and to his understanding of literature as a *locus* of semantic decontextualization. According to many critics, Manganelli's fictions are best understood as language-experiments based on formal variation and operating entirely on the level of the signifier. Radical literary nonsense – the complete break with *all* semantic conventions – is seen as Manganelli's subversive response to the constraints of the "linguistic universe", his way of escaping the tyranny of bourgeois ideology and its language of power. As I argue in Chapter Four, however, things are rather more complicated. Formalist readings of literature as a self-referential domain

7 Manganelli, *Diario 2E*, 20th June 1955; now in Belpoliti and Cortellessa (eds), 2006, p. 93.

give an extreme and rather misleading impression of Manganelli's work and fail to capture the complexity of his sophisticated play with common sense, literary nonsense and fantasy. Instead of defining literature in terms of its reference, I therefore suggest that Manganelli's self-conscious, anti-realist fictions bracket the problem of signification, concentrating instead on the wealth and multiplicity of fantasy's fictional worlds.

Manganelli's "opacity" and his alleged hostility to fictional narrative are also the subject of Chapter Five, which argues that Manganelli – despite his fascination with nonsense – never endorsed the idea of absolute semantic indeterminacy. When Manganelli's works throw into question the conventional relation between text and world, the reader discovers a wealth of stories, which seem to spring directly from the most basic units of language: phonetic ambivalence brings about semantic ambiguity; apparently finite descriptions culminate in seemingly endless digressions; metaphorical and literal meanings are inverted; narrative becomes reversible, contradictory and self-denying. Manganelli's most intricate works – from *Hilarotragoedia* (1964) to *Centuria* (1979) – are at once an attack on established genre conventions and a passionate homage to storytelling. Looking beneath the surface of Manganelli's fictions, we discover a life-long fascination with narrative and, even more surprisingly, a firm belief that storytelling is integral to the structuring of our experience, to the acquisition of knowledge and self-awareness, to our making sense of the world.

Chapter Six considers Manganelli's remark that his books may be read as complex visual images, whose intricacy is best understood, like in the visual arts, as an ideal simultaneity of meaning: "uno spazio mentale, un luogo assoluto che tollera una descrizione solo secondo le regole del disegno, una minuta catalogazione delle linee".[8] How are we to make sense of this recommendation, or of Manganelli's claim that true works of literature are "cubic"?[9] In *Nuovo commento* (1969) Manganelli's presents

8 Manganelli 1987c, p. 17.

9 "Ora, se il libro è cubico, e dunque a tre dimensioni, esso è percorribile non solo secondo il sentiero delle parole sulla pagina, coatto e grammaticalmente garantito, ma secondo altri itinerari, diversamente usando i modi per collegare parole e interpunzioni, lacune e 'a capo'" (Manganelli 1977, p. 7).

literary writing as a creation of textual arabesques – concentric, circular patterns; expanding waves; circular labyrinths and maps – and thereby suggests an alternative to the conventional ordering of plot. Even where he transcends the constraints of fiction, however, Manganelli ultimately relies on the expectations associated with plotted narrative. As I attempt to show, temporal structures are not abolished in his fiction, but used in residual and parodic ways to engage the self-conscious reader, to create new hypotheses of interpretation and previously unperceived networks of significance.

Formalist readings of avant-garde literature often swerve away from the level of content, especially where certain features of a text are perceived as disturbing or offensive. In the final part of this book, I suggest a different approach. Manganelli's theoretical reflections, according to this study, cannot be separated from his fascination with themes such as the descent into hell, the fragmentation of body and mind, death, spectres and dancing corpses. Chapter Seven considers Manganelli's visions of disembodiment and dying and examines how widespread anxieties about death are translated into a highly prolific and coherent system of thought and metaphor. Dying, according to Manganelli, is not a unique event, but a never-ending state of agony, a death-in-life, that accompanies every moment of our conscious existence. In *Agli dèi ulteriori* (1972), *Sconclusione* (1976) and *Dall'inferno* (1985) Manganelli's gives shape to nightmarish other-worlds, where emotions, actions and perceptions exist independently from a controlling subject, where bodies lose their shape, and inanimate objects come alive. This book, however, ends by showing Manganelli in a more playful vein. In the final chapter, I consider "Un'amore impossibile" (1972), an epistolary exchange between Hamlet and the Princess of Clèves, and perhaps the most intriguing outcome of Manganelli's early interest in linguistic universes, fictional worlds and their boundaries. For Manganelli, Hamlet is above all a prototypical avant-garde artist, whose vocation originates in a desire for rupture, but whose real achievement, according to Manganelli, consists in the creation of deliberately meaningless gestures, which he continues to repeat even when his ambitions are revealed as mere illusions. Instead of mourning the death of the avant-garde, Manganelli transforms Hamlet's meaningless rebellion into a *phantasmagoria*, a spectral farce.

Instead of looking forward to new forms of artistic expression, he looks *back* to the avant-garde and endorses its style and concerns with a retrospective, ironic self-awareness. In Manganelli's deliberately anachronistic fictions, modernist concerns – formalism, self-questioning, and the radical displacement of established conventions – appear like a stage costume, a deliberate self-constraint: the eloquence of ghosts.

"There are writers who present themselves before the critic with just the right amount of drapery that is necessary for decency", writes Henry James in 1888, in a review of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, "but Mr Stevenson is not one of those – he makes his appearance in an amplitude of costume. His costume is part of his character ... it never occurs to us to ask how he would look without it. Before all things he is a writer with a style".[10] Manganelli, who admired Stevenson more than James, could hardly have paid a greater compliment. Nor would he have objected to being called a writer with a style. If a new Henry James went in search for an Italian author "in an amplitude of costume", Manganelli, I believe, would be his obvious candidate.

10 Henry James "Robert Louis Stevenson", *The Century Magazine* 35, n. 6, April 1888; reprinted in James 1970, p. 139, and in Halberstam 1995, p. 59.

CHAPTER 1

Beyond the Avant-garde

> L'homme d'avant-garde est comme un ennemi à l'intérieur de la cité qu'il s'acharne à disloquer.
>
> — EUGÈNE IONESCO[1]

> Les antimodernes, ce sont des modernes en liberté.
>
> — ANTOINE COMPAGNON[2]

Over the past decade, a remarkable increase in specialist scholarship has done much to reveal the originality of Manganelli's literary works and to emphasize his interest in a wide range of theoretical models.[3] While this has established Manganelli's reputation as one of Italy's most sophisticated and innovative modernist authors, it also seems to have drawn attention away from his early involvement with Italy's new avant-garde. Recent scholarly

1 Ionesco 1962, p. 27.

2 Compagnon 2005, p. 14.

3 As Marco Belpoliti and Andrea Cortellessa point out, critical interest in Manganelli exceeds all expectations: "Non c'è dubbio che la sua fortuna non sia mai stata così florida come negli ultimi cinque anni. [...] Probabilmente è giusto dire che il nostro sarebbe stato un paese (non solo letterariamente) più vivibile, più divertente senz'altro, se l'icona dello Scrittore, nei trent'anni di loro vita parallela, fosse stata più simile a quella di Manganelli che a quella di Moravia" (Marco Belpoliti and Andrea Cortellessa, *Editoriale*, in Belpoliti and Cortellessa (eds) 2006, p. 4). Recent theoretical studies have addressed a wide range of topics: from Manganelli's interest in Blanchot and Barthes (Cavadini 1997), to Jungian psychoanalysis (Pulce 1996, Paolone 2002, Zilahi De' Gyurgyokai 2008); from theories of the Baroque (Manica 2000, Menechella 2002, Francucci 2006) to ethics (Montani 2001), utopianism (Deidier 2000) and negative theology (Kuon 1993).

work on Manganelli contains few direct references to *Gruppo 63* and the author's association with *neoavanguardia* appears to be of little interest to most literary critics.[4] Arguably, this neglect needs be seen as the effect of a wider reassessment of post-war avant-garde culture. Since the mid-1980s, literary scholarship has been dominated by an argument – first put forward in Peter Bürger's influential *Theorie der Avantgarde* – which associates "genuine" avant-garde culture with the social conditions of the early twentieth century and which treats subsequent artistic practice as mostly derivative, postmodern mimicry.[5] In Italy, where a translation of Bürger's *Theorie der Avantgarde* was first published in 1990, this vision of the new avant-garde as a group of politically naïve, bourgeois dilettanti has given new credibility and support to traditional Marxist detractors of *Gruppo 63* such as Gianni Scalia and Franco Fortini.[6] At the same time, an increasing interest in Postmodernism has prompted many former *neoavanguardisti* to reconsider (and often to re-write) their ideas in relation to new critical paradigms.[7] As a result, earlier debates about avant-garde art as a direct contestation of dominant socio-political conditions have been mostly replaced by more anxious reflections about the logic of representation or the artist's alleged loss of oppositional force.[8] In a recent study of the Italian experimental novel, Luigi Weber notes:

4 See Pulce 2004; Belpoliti and Cortellessa (eds) 2006. Menechella 2002, by contrast, describes *Gruppo 63* as a decisive influence on Manganelli's writing.

5 See Bürger 1974. See also Huyssen 1986 and Berardinelli 1994. For a critique of Bürger's ideas see Lüdke (ed.) 1976 and Foster 1996.

6 See Fortini 1965; Scalia 1968 and 1992. The Italian reception of Bürger's ideas is discussed in *Allegoria*, V, 15, 1993.

7 See especially Barilli 1984, 1987 and 1994. For a detailed overview of the Italian debate about *neoavanguardia* and postmodernism, see Jansen 1997; Ganeri 1998 and Jansen 2002. Spinazzola 1989 treats Italian postmodernism as a consequence of the decline of the new avant-garde; Di Gesu 2003, by contrast, describes the poetics of *Gruppo 63* as an early manifestation of Italian postmodernism.

8 For a very good general overview see Bertens 1995 and Ceserani 1997.