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In Search of Lost Novels

When I was growing up, the most bookish member of my family was my father's older brother, Tony. Neither my father nor his brother had graduated from high school, but both of them owned some books. My father once read Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* aloud to me—it is one of my fondest memories of him—but my much admired Uncle Tony was generally considered “more serious,” was known to buy books (mostly at second hand) and to read them too. My father's days as a purchaser of books probably ended before I was born. Aside from *Huckleberry Finn*, I do not remember seeing him read a book although he must have done so from time to time. During most of my childhood, he worked two jobs and generally came home exhausted, but he was a regular newspaper reader, professed admiration for writers, and encouraged my interest in reading. After he retired, he read books from time to time, mostly books I gave him because I thought they would interest him, but he was not a great reader.

Tony's books were kept in a bookcase and were easily accessible. The centerpiece of his private library was a set of the Harvard Classics, and I think he read most of them. My father's books were also kept in a bookcase, but it had a glass door and by the time I had become curious about his books, you had to move the porcelain figurines and assorted

knick-knacks out of the way before you could get at them. I don't remember many of these books, but they included at least a couple of novels by Rafael Sabatini and an English translation of a book by the Flemish writer Felix Timmermans called *The Perfect Joy of Saint Francis*, a novel about Francis of Assisi.

I don't remember if I actually ever read this book, but I had gone through the effort of extracting it from the glass covered and figurine guarded bookshelf in order to show it to Tony. At first, my uncle expressed an encouraging interest in my plan to read this book, but then he noticed a line under the title on the book jacket: a novel. A *novel* about Saint Francis? Why would anyone want to read a novel on such a subject? It was an indication that the book was not serious and not really worth reading. Tony was serious; he didn't read novels, except for *War and Peace*.

Much as I admired my uncle—he was a handsome man who projected an air of distinction; he would have been perfect as a senator or a secretary of state in a 1950s Hollywood melodrama about Great Events—his contempt for novels did not have a lasting influence on me. I eventually went to graduate school, and having read *The Rhetoric of Fiction* at an impressionable age, devoted probably entirely too much attention to novels for years thereafter. I am now actually writing one.

I am surprised to discover that at present, my Uncle Tony's views are widely shared by editors and publishers. Their scorn for novels has apparently given rise to something that is exactly like a novel but is called a memoir. Here's how these "memoirs" come about. A writer sends a manuscript of a novel to an agent, who sends it to some editors. It is a first person story of degradation and redemption. No one wants to publish it. "We can't sell this book," the editors say. Then it is sent out again; the text is unchanged, but it is called a memoir. Now it can be published. "Oh, yes. We can sell this. Plenty of people out there want redemption. It fits into the self-help and rehabilitation culture that has been so skillfully worked up by the greatest book promoter in history, Oprah Winfrey. If

people believe it is true, it will make all the difference. “

If Felix Timmermans’s publisher had only called *The Perfect Joy of Saint Francis* a biography instead of a novel, my Uncle Tony would have considered it worth reading, and if someone had pointed out that some of Timmermans’s book is not based on historical evidence, but is just invented, his publisher could have said it is an *imaginative* biography. As one of the leading scholars on mysticism has written, it is simply futile at this point to try to determine what actually happened to Saint Francis on Mount Alverno in 1224 when his body was imprinted with the five wounds of the crucified Christ. Saint Bonaventure, an early Franciscan, although not a member of the first generation of the order, wrote the official biography of the founder and relates this event as a fact. It is part of Francis’s legend; it is central to his iconography. Did it happen? Does it matter? Well, it mattered to many people in the thirteenth century and would matter to many today if Oprah Winfrey promoted the reading of saints’ legends.

Saints’ legends were the “memoirs” of the middle ages. They were popular and part of their appeal was that they were believed to be true, even though most of them are plainly fantastic and follow a generic plot-line as predictable as any of the recovery or redemption memoirs now so popular. A few of them are deeply moving once you learn to read them for what they are, allegories—expressions of faith presented as narrative. The greatest of the saints’ legends are subtle and original allegories, not very different from certain passages in the New Testament.

In the Gospel of Luke, for example, Jesus tells a story about a rich man who feasted every day in grand style and a poor man named Lazarus who begged at the rich man’s gate. When they die, the rich man goes to Hades where he is in torment, and Lazarus is received into the bosom of Abraham. The rich man calls to Abraham to send Lazarus to him with some water, but Abraham tells him that there is an impenetrable chasm between him and Lazarus just as there was a vast difference between them when they were alive. The rich man then asks Abraham to send

Lazarus to his brothers who are still alive so that they don't end up as he has. But Abraham says, "They have Moses and the prophets"

"They won't pay heed to Moses or the prophets," the rich man responds, "but if someone were to come back from the dead, that would make all the difference."

"No," Abraham says, "if they won't pay heed to Moses and the prophets, they won't change their ways even if someone were to rise from the dead."

This little story is plainly "a story." It is not presented as literally true and could not be taken to be literally true by the people to whom it is told. It is sometimes thought, however, to be the seed of another story about another man named Lazarus, who actually does rise from the dead. This second story takes up all of chapter eleven of the Fourth Gospel and is presented in an entirely different fashion. There are no conventional marks of "story" here such as the conversation between the rich man and Abraham. It is not a story Jesus tells to an audience of people who have come to listen to him. The narrative voice of the Fourth Gospel is anonymous and magisterial. Aside from the simple fact that people do not rise from the dead, there is no clear reason to think that this story is being presented as an allegory. Although sophisticated readers in the middle ages understood all of the gospel narratives as having an allegorical sense, that did not mean they did not also have a literal or historical sense, and they took this story to be true. Many readers still do and would be upset if they thought it was "only a story," although the dialogues between Jesus and Lazarus's two sisters are the heart of the passage and need not be affected by the way a reader understands the event of Lazarus rising from the dead—presented as literally true or presented as an allegory about trust in God.

Popular audiences in the middle ages would reject this claim. For them, it would make a great difference if the story were literally true or if it were an allegory about trust in God. Because it was so important to this audience that the story be literally true, they were prepared to believe

things that almost no current readers of the New Testament believe—that Lazarus was a historical person who literally died twice, once in ancient Palestine, once in what is now France. His second burial took place in the Burgundian city of Autun where his relics lie in the cathedral church named for him. His sister Mary, who sailed from ancient Palestine to Marseille with him, is buried in the splendid Romanesque basilica on the hill of Vézelay.

These relics were not merely good for drawing pilgrims in the middle ages; they were essential. People went to Vézelay to pray at the tomb of Mary Magdalene because they believed she could intercede with God for them, and the best place to get her attention was at her tomb. She had an exceptional story of redemption as part of her legend and was a personal friend of Jesus. Most, perhaps all of these people, would have been outraged at the thought that they were not actually praying at the tomb of Mary Magdalene.

In the middle ages, writers of saints' legends had to pay attention to the expectations of pilgrims. As an aspiring novelist today, I have to pay attention to the expectations of Oprah Winfrey and the book buyers she influences—the pilgrims of our day. Even though she almost certainly will never directly promote my novel, she has affected what publishers think they can sell. They won't think they can sell my novel. Now if it were a memoir...

I will not claim that the novel I am writing is a memoir although it is a first person account of personal crisis—not drug addiction or child abuse or anything similarly sensational, but a crisis of faith. A person who has devoted his adult life to fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting comes to the realization that the paintings are just paint, so to speak. He has looked at the representations of people in these paintings and has poured his imagination into them as if they were alive. He has a scholar's knowledge of who these people are, detailed knowledge of the familiar objects that surrounded them, but in the end, these people are as far removed from him as the rich man was from Lazarus. They are not alive. Only a

self-deluding intellectual could possibly have thought otherwise. He can look at them as if they are real, but they cannot respond. What is worse, a lifetime of looking at these pictures has caused him to look at actual living people as if they are pictures too. Having come to this realization, he thinks he has been duped into wasting his life on something that is not true.

I know what I am up against, so I have salted this novel with all sorts of quite real things. Real cities, real hotels, real restaurants, real museums, real paintings, real churches, real people. I am trying to lure my readers into thinking that even though this book is called a novel—and I will stoutly deny that it is anything else—it is actually all true. After all, you can go to the cities, stay at the hotels, eat at the restaurants, go to the museums and see the paintings, visit the churches; with a little work you can even peel away the made-up names and figure out who the real people behind them were. At this point, it is very easy to believe that the first person narrator is not a character in a novel at all; it is I—which is what the character is called “I.” The more I deny that this book is a memoir disguised as a novel, the more my readers will be convinced it is all true and for that reason worth reading.

I am encouraged in this strategy by the fact that Marcel Proust did this very thing with outstanding success. He was almost as obscure when he started writing his novel as I am now, although like me he had published a couple of previous books that drew little attention. Actually his reputation was a little worse than mine; one of my previous books was awarded a prize by the French Academy; two of his previous books were translations from a language he conceded he did not know. He was, however, a millionaire five or six times over, so when all the publishers said, this book will never sell, we can't possibly publish it, he had the first part published at his own expense. His book was a long and sophisticated crisis-and-recovery story, and once it began to appear in print, it started to find readers, among them a few of the editors who had previously rejected it. This book that nobody wanted to publish in 1912 has had a

terrific run for almost ninety years now, ever since the second installment was published in 1919 and started to attract attention. It has a sterling academic reputation and is one of the all-time best-sellers in the luxurious French *Pléiade* series. It is the best kind of best-seller; people buy it who will never read it, and there is a whole industry devoted to trying to sort out how much of it is actually memoir, so to speak. The more the author complained that just because he wrote "I," people thought he was talking about himself, but he wasn't talking about himself *at all*, the more people were persuaded it was all true. It is a shame that Proust was never a guest on Oprah Winfrey's television program. What an interview that would have been. As it is, this book has had a remarkable effect on the world-wide sales of a shell-shaped cookie known as a madeleine. (The shell is an attribute of pilgrims, and the cookie is named for Mary Magdalene who attracted so many pilgrims to Vézelay). Had the world's greatest book promoter got Proust to admit he didn't make up a word of it, that it is all true, that it all came back to him once he tasted the cookie he dipped into the tea, all the social snobs, possessive lovers, and neurotic insomniacs who want to recover their lost childhood memories could find redemption while boosting profits of tea-and-madeleine purveyors beyond the dreams of avarice.