

In Search of Lost Books
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Introduction:
The Risk of an Impossibility

THIS IS MY JOURNEY in search of the traces of eight lost books as legendary as lode-bearing mines during the Gold Rush: everyone seeking them is convinced that they exist, and that they will be the one to find them, though in reality no one has certain proof of their existence, or reliable maps. In this case too, the clues are fragile, the hope of finding these pages scarce. And yet the journey is still worth undertaking.

Lost books are those that once existed but are no longer here.

They are not those forgotten books that, as happens to the majority of the works of mankind, gradually fade from the memories of those who have read them, slip from the histories of literature and then vanish, together with the existence of their authors. Books such as these can always be unearthed in some obscure corner of a library, or be re-printed by a curious publisher. Perhaps no one knows anything about them any longer. But they are still there.

Nor are they those books that were not even born: conceived, expected and dreamt of, but prevented for one reason or another from ever being written. In such cases we are also confronted by a lack, by a void that cannot be filled. But it's one created by notional works which never actually materialized.

For me, lost books are those an author did in fact write, even if they might not have been brought to completion: books that someone has seen, or even happened to read, but which were subsequently destroyed, or vanished leaving scarcely a trace.

The factors leading to their disappearance are extremely diverse. These texts may have fallen under the guillotine of the author's dissatisfaction, in pursuit of a kind of perfection that was impossible to achieve. No doubt it could be argued that if the author was so dissatisfied then perhaps we would have been so too – and that if certain contemporary writers were to experience such dissatisfaction with their own work, well, then we might all benefit from it. But then we find ourselves reading those books that someone has courageously rescued from the destructive will of an author – works by Kafka, for instance, in the most well-known case of this kind – and immediately realize how fortunate we have been that the writer's intentions were not respected.

In other cases the void was created by circumstantial and historical factors – above all during that conflict which

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spread everywhere without distinguishing between the battlefield and the home front, between combatants and civilians. Attempts to safeguard unpublished manuscripts during the Second World War, as we shall see, did not always turn out well.

In other instances it was censorship that intervened, including self-censorship, because the books involved seemed both scandalous and dangerous – and not only in a metaphorical sense, since in certain European countries in the nineteenth and even the twentieth centuries, homosexuality was a crime severely punishable by law.

It has also happened that some act of carelessness or forgetfulness caused a fire, or led to a theft (one that hardly profited the unwitting thieves: what, after all, was all that used paper good for?), resulting in the loss of years' worth of work and obliging an author to start all over again, if only they had the will and could muster the energy required to do so.

And then there are the wishes of the heirs and executors. In particular, those of an author's widow or widower determined to protect themselves or their children, or to safeguard the reputation of their husband or wife from incomplete as well as unpublished works, or to shield those persons still living who were recognizably portrayed in them.

In the eight cases that I will give an account of, there are examples of each of these factors leading to the

disappearance of books. But the conclusion reached is always the same: the work searched for seems lost for ever, even though there is always a chance that someone, somewhere, at some time in the future...

Every time I have chanced across the story of a lost book I have experienced something like the feeling that gripped me as a child when reading certain novels which spoke of secret gardens, of mysterious cable-cars, of abandoned castles. I have recognized the opportunity for a quest, felt the fascination of that which escapes us – and the hope of becoming the hero who will be able to solve the mystery.

In those novels for children, the solution would invariably emerge towards the end of the book, obviously suggested by the author himself – though it seemed to me at the time to have resulted from my own concentrated attention, from my own imagination.

Of these eight lost books I have not managed to find a single one, or at least not in the conventional sense of the word ‘find’. Only in the case related in the first chapter have I been in the position of actually being able to read one of these works *before* it was lost. Though even then I was not able to prevent its subsequent destruction.

Perhaps it is precisely because of this particular failure that I have decided to follow the clues towards other lost books, and to tell their stories, as if they were adventures. I first did this in a series of radio broadcasts, assisted by

a few friends who were as passionate as I was about the authors and books chosen.

Together we explored the paths leading to their disappearance, consoled at least by the pages that had survived and that we could continue to read.

Later I decided to go back and retrace these same routes alone, as we do sometimes with places in which we have been happy, in the hope of recapturing the same feeling again – as well as to see if some clue that we had mistakenly overlooked might offer new insight into what had really occurred there. I have no doubt continued to stumble in the dark. Yet as frequently happens when travelling alone, I have indeed noticed things I had failed to see when walking in the company of others.

Each lost book has its own unique story. Yet there are also certain details that establish peculiar connections between them – between, for example, the cases of the Italian writer Romano Bilenchi and Sylvia Plath (an unfinished novel and a spouse who makes a fateful decision in the author's name); between Walter Benjamin and Bruno Schulz (born in the same year, both Jewish, both disappearing along with their last books during the Second World War), or between Nikolai Gogol and Malcolm Lowry (both wanting in their own way to write a *Divine Comedy*, both failing in the attempt). But what recurs most, with disturbing regularity, is fire. The fact that most of the lost works of which we are speaking were burnt reminds us

of their essential fragility. For we are dealing here with a period – the two centuries before our own – during which it was only paper that permitted the preservation of words written by men and women. And as we know only too well, paper burns easily.

We might think that today it is rather more difficult to *lose* a book, and that the numerous virtual supports we rely on to preserve them precludes the risk of anything being definitively destroyed. Yet it seems to me that this very immateriality may in certain cases prove to be as precarious as old-fashioned paper, and that those vessels freighted with words, which we launch onto the waters, in the hope that someone will notice them and receive them safely into their own harbour, can disappear into infinite space like spacecraft at the edge of the universe, receding from us at increasing velocity.

But these losses, anyway – are we sure that they are merely and exclusively just losses?

A little while ago I stumbled across an old notebook of mine in which I had written out certain passages I'd been struck by. There was one from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*:

One can feel an attraction towards a particular person.
But to release that fount of sorrow, that sense of the irreparable, those agonies which prepare the way for

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love, there must be – and this is, perhaps, more than a person, the actual object which our passion seeks so anxiously to embrace – the risk of an impossibility.

What if the passion by which I am seized, by which we are all seized when encountering these lost books, had the same origin as this amorous one described by Proust? What if it were this very risk of an impossibility which justified that combination of impulse and melancholy, of curiosity and fascination, which develops with the thought of something that existed once but that we can no longer hold in our hands? Could it be the void itself which fascinates us, since it is possible to fill it with the notion that what is missing might be something crucial, perfect, incomparable?

These books also serve as challenges to our imagination, spurs to other writings, to the development of passions nourished by their very intangibility. It is no accident that many of these lost pages have ended up by prompting the writing of new books, of further ones.

But this is not all. There's something more besides.

In a novel from the end of the last century, *Fugitive Pieces* by the Canadian Anne Michaels, there is this:

There's no absence, if there remains the memory of absence. [...] If one no longer has land but has the memory of land, then one can make a map.

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So this book is my own personal map, drawn from the memory of absent books which, with one exception, I have not been able to read. And since mapping was involved, when I was deciding in what order to relate these stories – whether to proceed chronologically, or alphabetically, or through internal links that would connect for the reader one case history with another – I decided in the end to choose geography: to chart a journey around the world in eight volumes rather than in eighty days. I started with the book that I failed personally to rescue, in my own home town of Florence, since its author also lived there – and went from there to London, the city to which like Phileas Fogg I also returned, after a circular journey passing through France, Poland, Russia, Canada and Spain.

By the end of the voyage I had realized that lost books possess something that others do not: they bequeath to those who have not read them the possibility of imagining them, of telling stories about them, of re-inventing them.

And if on the one hand they continue to elude us, to move further off the more we try to seize hold of them, on the other they come back to life in us – and ultimately, as in Proustian time, we can lay claim to having found them.