

Giorgio Van Straten's Journey in Search of Eight Lost Books

(April 24, 2016)



Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò hosted, with the participation of authors Jhumpa Lahiri and Tiziana Rinaldi Castro, one of its many successful book presentations for *Storie di Libri Perduti* (Stories of Lost Books, 2016, Editori Laterza), a book by Giorgio Van Straten. “*Storie di Libri Perduti* tells the story of other books that were but are no more: lost books aren't forgotten works or words that were born in the author's mind but never laid down on paper: they are books the author wrote, that someone saw or even read, but that were then destroyed or simply disappeared.”

On April 21, 2016 Prince, the multi-platinum-selling music legend, died. Regardless of the speculation on how and why that happened, there is a lot of talk about “the vault,” a real walk-in safe located in the basement of Prince's Paisley Park estate. Such vault is said to contain enough unreleased music to last to the end of the century and legend says that this might actually be Prince's best music. “If it were to be opened, and the music packaged and sold posthumously, Prince's estate could sell tens of millions of albums for potentially hundreds of millions of dollars. But it's not clear that Prince ever wanted that music released,” CNN reports, “Prince's former manager Alan Leeds told *The Guardian* last year that Prince said he one day planned on burning everything in the vault.” Now that he is gone what is going to happen? Who has the right to decide?



On April 22, 2016, NYU's Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò hosted one of its many successful book presentations for *Storie di Libri Perduti* (Stories of Lost Books, 2016, Editori Laterza), a book by Giorgio Van Straten. “*Storie di Libri Perduti* tells the story of other books that were but are no more: lost books aren't forgotten works or words that were born in the author's mind but never laid down on paper: they are books the author wrote, that someone saw or even read, but that were then destroyed or simply disappeared. These books were burned, torn apart, stolen, or they vanished, but they surely were written: they existed. They are works by the likes of Gogol, Lord Byron, Hemingway, Bilenchi, Lowry, Plath, Benjamin and Shulz.”

Sure, Prince made music but still, I couldn't help thinking about all those songs, hidden in the silence of the vault. “Who really upsets me are the relatives,” Van Straten, who is a well-known novelist and the Director of the Italian Cultural Institute in New York, told his two interviewers, authors Jhumpa Lahiri and Tiziana Rinaldi Castro, “I believe they do not have the right to destroy the material; they could set it aside, lock it in a drawer but not kill it. As a reader I feel that the book belongs to me, it was written for me to be read. Authors have worked to the end to make us read that book, that's an injustice.”

An example? “During his exile in 1822, Byron named the Irish poet Thomas Moore (1779-1852) as his literary executor and handed him a manuscript of his personal memoirs which he wanted to be published at a later date. But with Byron dead, and the public clamoring for anything bearing his name, Murray (Byron's publisher) made a decision. Having been presented with the two volumes of Byron's memoirs by Moore, he decided he had to act. Byron's memoirs had to be destroyed. With the agreement of five of Byron's friends and executors of his will (and with the only opposition coming from Moore), the men set about pulling apart the pages and burning the pages in the fireplace of the drawing room. Whatever Byron had written, Murray believed the memoirs were so scandalous they would forever damage Byron's reputation.”

Byron's is not the only case: supposedly Ted Hughes destroyed wife Sylvia Plath's last journal not to protect their reputation but to protect his children. On a personal level Van Straten told the story of a writer he actually knew, Romano Bilenchi. “After his death his wife called me and told me she had found a manuscript he had written during a period of apparent inactivity. She had me read it and asked not to make any copies. Unfortunately I did as she asked. The book was about their love story, so I can see how she felt the need to protect their personal life. But I can't accept its destruction. I believe that if he wanted it destroyed he would have done so and would not have kept it locked for over thirty years. The loss of a book is more dramatic than the loss of its author. We all know that a person is going to die sooner or later while his/her writings can live on forever. The physical loss of a person doesn't mean they have to end up in oblivion. The point of writing this book is to somehow give life to those books that didn't have a chance to have a life.”

Differently from the aforementioned authors, Franz Kafka directly asked his friend, Max Brod, to burn all his writings after his death. Although he was a published author, there was so much he had written that nobody had seen, including his two great masterpieces, *The Trial* and *The Castle*. Needless to say Brod didn't burn them, got them published and Kafka is now one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. The question here is ethical, if Brod had done as he was told we wouldn't know the inexplicable experiences of Josef K. Should Brod have carried out Kafka's wishes? The answer is debatable.

These are stories of destruction, of posthumous fame but also of preservation. In 1852, Nikolai Gogol burned several of his writings, including the second half of his masterpiece *Dead Souls*. His actions, probably due to the knowledge of his imminent death, prove the author's control over his intellectual property, ensuring that his life's work would not end up in the wrong hands. This is an example of extreme authorial control and an effort to protect what was his. “Nothing justifies the destruction of a book,” Van Straten commented “and I live with the wish that these books haven't really disappeared and that they would somehow come to life.”

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