The Malatesta Collection

Roger Zelazny

I’m going to miss the books.

Maybe I’m just a senile throwback to the lecherous times, but I like to think it is some bit of scholarly attachment as well.

But I helped to uncover them, so it is only fitting that I be here as they are put away.

Don’t be fooled, Cosmic Eye, I am not the voice of one man. All of us contain some of me, as well as Paul Malatesta.

Roden is mounting the platform now. The books are in the box, the box is in the cornerstone, and the statue is draped.

It was one year ago today that he made the discovery, quite by accident. He was digging a hole, that mad sculptor, digging a hole in Time. It was in one of the many unexcavated mounds, where the fragments of old civilizations can sometimes be found. He pokes into them quite a bit⁠—hoping to find a bust, a torso, a fragment of decorated wall. On occasion he comes up with some striking discoveries.

But there was only one Malatesta collection.

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“This occasion deserves some comment,” he begins. “Whether this is dictated by its notoriety, or by virtue of its value to historians, I cannot say.

“But I can say this,” he continues, “what you are doing is wrong. In the light of eternal values, you are being untrue to the species by burying that which is not dead.”

There were troubled faces about him on the platform. But he could not be interrupted; no effrontery could stand before the massive dignity of his ninety years. So he went on:

“I take willing part in this ceremony because every grave demands a marker, as surely as the root utters tree. Every passing demands endurable comment, though centuries delayed. We called them forth into the light for a brief moment, and you of the light were shocked, for they were living. Now you would reinter them, and I, their stepfather, have been called upon to commemorate this thing that you do.

“I hate you, all of you. But you must listen to me⁠—you are too polite not to⁠—and doubtless you will applaud when I have finished.

“I remember the day when we found them...”

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I remember it also. His tiny form, in that threadbare cloak he always wears, shot into my office like an arrow. The door banged against the wall, and he, hopping from one leg to another before my desk:

“Come quickly! I have found the soul of our ancestors!”

He darted about like a sparrow, making several false starts toward the door, checking himself each time, when he saw that I did not rise.

“Get on your feet and come with me!” he ordered. “This has waited too long already!”

“Sit down,” I told him. “I have an Ancient Literature class in half an hour. It would take something awfully important to call it off.”

He snorted his white mustache away from his words:

“Ancient Literature! Still mooning over Pamela and David Copperfield, eh? Let me tell you something⁠—there is more to it than that, and I’ve got it!”

Roden had a reputation.

He was an anomaly, almost a pariah, a pet of the wealthy, though he insulted them to their faces, a friend of the artist, whose labors he always encouraged, no matter how puerile⁠—a bohemian in an age where bohemians could not exist⁠—a purveyor of cheap art by commission, a creator of the other kind, which went ignored. The greatest sculptor alive.

Finally, he settled into a seat, nearly immortalizing me to statue, with his basilisk’s glare.

“I’m not being uncooperative,” I apologized. “It’s just that I have responsibilities. I can’t go running off until I know what I’m chasing.”

“Responsibilities,” he repeated, in one of his milder tones. “Yes, I guess you do. Almost everyone does these days. There aren’t many free spirits any more⁠—grail-chasers who would take an old man’s word that something is important enough to be worth an hour or two.”

This hurt, because I respect him more than anyone else I know⁠—with his encyclopedic knowledge of art, all his engaging eccentricities, and the cold fire that burns within his works.

“I am sorry,” I said. “Tell me what this is all about.”

“You are a teacher of literature,” he declared. “I’ve found you an unread library.”

I swallowed, blinking, and shelves of books flowed like rivers behind my eyelids.

“Ancient books?” I whispered.

He nodded.

“How old?”

“Many from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and lots of older ones.”

I was shaking. How many years had I dreamed of such a find? Mostly, the mounds just held junk; paper is so transient a thing.

“Many?” I asked.

“Many,” he acknowledged.

“I’ll have to tell the secretary of the department that there won’t be a class.” I stood. “I’ll be right back. ⁠—Is it far?”

“An hour’s drive.”

I flew down the hall, shedding responsibilities like feathers.

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“...When we examined them we could not believe our good fortune. There were so many⁠—so perfectly preserved against the century’s nightfall. The powerful walls of the structure had defended them against moisture, decay, insects...”

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I held it in quivering hands. Bacon? The legendary Shakespeare, whose name alone survived? Could they have spoken like that? I was appalled. Mark Twain’s acerbic brilliance had endured⁠—but this!

I closed 1601 carefully, and placed it in a protective wrapper I had brought. I opened a book by a man named Miller.

Ten minutes later I was sick, very sick. I accepted the bottle of wine Roden produced from under his cloak. He said nothing as I drank.

By candlelight, he was sketching the strange tableau in the corner.

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What remained of two human beings rested upon what remained of a bed. I tried not to look in that direction, but their position was so obvious. My eyes fleshed the skeleton arms. I saw them embracing as the bombs fell; I felt the concrete shake from the burst, striving to stop the radiations that consumed its maker. Now bone embraced bone in a garden of books, grinned at the live voyeur.

I pretended to look at Moll Flanders, holding the book to block out the sight.

“This place was called a fallout shelter, wasn’t it?”

“That’s right. Many people built them before the dark times.”

“And this man,” I eyed the elaborate Ex Libra page to Kama Sutra, “this Paul Malatesta prepared his shelter rather unusually, did he not?”

“I don’t know.” He flipped his sketchpad shut. “I don’t know how they thought in those days, but I suppose a man stocked it with what he cherished most.”

“I teach Literature,” I thought aloud, “but I’ve never heard of these books⁠—the Harris autobiography, Rochester’s Poems on Several Occasions, Coryat’s Crudities, Gamiani, Flossie, The Festival of Love...”

“Then it’s time you did,” he replied, “since they’re there.”

“But the language,” I protested, “the subject matter⁠—it’s so, so...”

“Crude?” he supplied. “Basic? Elemental? Scatalogical? Impolite?”

“Yes.”

“I found this place yesterday. I spent the entire night reading. We need these books if we are to have a true picture of our Ancestors, and ourselves.”

“Ourselves?”

“Yes. You had better read those books over there,” he gestured, “the ones by the man named Freud. Do you think man is completely rational, and moral?”

“Of course. We have eliminated crime, education is compulsory. ⁠—We have advanced beyond our ancestors, both ethically and intellectually.”

“Nonsense!” he snorted again. “The basic nature of man has remained constant throughout history, so far as I can ascertain.”

“But these books...!”

“They travelled to the moon in those days, they conquered diseases we still suffer. They recognized the demonic spirit of Dionysus which lives in us all. The books that survived were the books most numerous⁠—the small caches have always supplied us with the most important ones⁠—unless you deem currency the mark of greatness.”

“I don’t know how they will be accepted...”

“ ‘If’,” corrected Roden quietly.

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“...If you have chosen the path of democratizing art out of existence, I am powerless to stop you. I can only protest. I can condone you, slightly, that you decided against burning them. But your decision to make them wait for a generation better qualified⁠—that is tantamount to eternal condemnation. And you know it, and I condemn you, in turn, for this action...”

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What a flurry, what a battle of critics, popular and scholarly, I aroused!

When I brought the Malatesta collection to the University a cheer arose from the professorial ranks, shortly to be replaced by raised eyebrows. I am not as old as Roden, but, in a society as proper as our own, I, also, am too old to insult. ⁠—But some came close.

At first, all was uncertainty and ambiguity.

⁠—True, it is an important find. Surely, they shed new light on the history of literature. Of course, we will give them our most unbiased attention. But the general public... Well, we had better wait until we have assessed them completely.

I had never heard of such a thing, and I told them so.

The table was surrounded by statues of ice. They chose to ignore what I had said, focussing once more, through thick glasses, the eyes of judgment.

“But Chaucer,” I pressed on, “Huysmans, the Oresteia! You can’t just throw them out because it hurts you to read them! They are literature, distillations of life by genius...”

“We are not convinced,” said an icicle, “that they are art.”

I exploded and quit my job, but nothing was ever done about my resignation, so I am still here. Literature is like pie, one piece is better than none at all.

“You did not release them. Instead, you have imprisoned them in the cornerstone of your new Philosophy Building⁠—which, in itself, demonstrates one of life’s implicit ironies⁠—and you commissioned me, before a year had passed, to construct their cenotaph.”

“You did not call it that, but, to balm your consciences⁠—moral people that you are⁠—you could not help but commemorate a greatness you had witnessed, though you despised it.

“I have constructed your memorial⁠—not one of my garish tabernacles of money, where gilt angels sport among seashells, but a memorial to man, as he was, is, and always shall be...”

Oh dead Malatesta! With your pale mistress Frances, sporting in a radioactive oven while the missiles hymned their canticle of death⁠— Did she weep? What did she say at the end? I read your diary up until the final entry of that last day⁠—“We are frying. Hell! They will find us the way we began⁠—”

I admire you, Malatesta, as I admire Castiglione and Da Vinci⁠—connoisseur, scholar, and man to the end! Spin on your way, atoms of a man, you have made the sunset of my life more colorful...

“It is,” he reached for the dark veil, “an enactment of the human condition.”

He drew it off.

Gasps filled the courtyard as tears filled my eyes. Roden had done it! In whatever back room or garret they might hide it, his fame would await the eventual call of posterity.

Steel ribs enamelled white⁠—that terrible position!⁠—skeleton arms locked in libidinous embrace forever, and the lascivious consolamentum of fleshless faces.

The bronze base bore the simple inscription, “The Kiss, by Roden.”

And then, I heard his voice in the distance:

“There it is. Do what you want with it⁠—but never let me near it again!”

Mindlessly, the applause broke forth, amidst the sighs and soft comments.

That day I quit again, for real.

A Word from Zelazny

This “was a very contrived exercise actually, in attempting a stream of speak interspersed with a series of flashbacks, to see if I could tell a story that way. I didn’t really care about the story, just the method.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This is not the first time that Dante Alighieri’s The Divine Comedy figured in Zelazny’s works. He indicated that the best books he had ever read included “The Iliad, The Divine Comedy, Don Quixote, Tom Jones, Moby Dick, Anna Karenina, The Magic Mountain,”*[[2]](#footnote-2)* and the discerning reader may pick up recurring allusions to each of these (and more) among Zelazny’s short stories, poems and novels.

Notes

The title and names in this piece are deliberate: “The Kiss” is a famous sculpture by Auguste Rodin, and he based it on the passionate adulterous love of the historical personages of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta. They were caught en flagrante by her husband (Paolo’s brother) Giovanni Malatesta, who murdered them. Francesca was used by her contemporary Dante Alighieri as a character in his Divine Comedy. Zelazny deliberately misspells Rodin as Roden throughout the text, perhaps to indicate deterioration in the historical record with passage of time. In the story, two characters Francesca and Malatesta died in a fallout shelter, their skeletons forever locked in sexual congress, surrounded by books that shocked their descendants.

Numerous actual book titles and authors figure in the text, many of them pertaining to aspects of sexual desire. Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded is a novel by Samuel Richardson; David Copperfield is the novel by Charles Dickens; Francis Bacon was a philosopher and scientist, but some claim he may have actually written Shakespeare’s works; Mark Twain was the pen name of author Samuel Clemens, whose works included Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn and 1601; Henry Miller’s Tropic of Cancer was considered pornography in the 1960s; Moll Flanders was written by Daniel DeFoe; The Kama Sutra is a book best known for its small section on sexual enjoyment and a description of assorted sexual positions; My Life and Loves is the notorious autobiography of Frank Harris which featured photos of nude women and recounted his own sexual exploits; John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, was known for lewd and ribald poetry of which Poems on Several Occasions was one collection; Coryat’s Crudities tells of Thomas Coryat’s journey across Europe and the gastronomic delights that he enjoyed; Gamiani is a French novel by Alfred de Musset; The Festival of Love is a poetry collection by R. Swainson Fisher; Sigmund Freud’s works discuss how subconscious drives and primitive urges motivate us; Geoffrey Chaucer wrote The Canterbury Tales; Joris-Karl Huysmans was most famous for the novel À rebours; the Oresteia is a trilogy of ancient Greek plays which includes the tale of Orestes, who killed his own mother after she killed his father.

Bohemian means an artist who lives and acts without regard for conventional rules and practices. A basilisk caused sudden death with its glance. Dionysus is the god of wine but also a promoter of civilization, peace and law. Scatalogical means pertaining to animal excrement, filth or obscenity. A cenotaph is an empty tomb with a monument placed over it. A canticle is a religious hymn or chant. Lascivious refers to an overt and usually offensive sexual desire. Baldassare Castiglione was an Italian Renaissance author best known for The Book of the Courtier (Il Cortegiano). Consolamentum was practiced by Cathars (a branch of Christianity) and consisted of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, reception of all the spiritual gifts, power to bind and loose, absolution, baptismal regeneration, and Ordination all in one ceremony.

1. Tightbeam #37, 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nova #1, June 1972. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)