

East-West and the myth of the empty quest: a comparative study of four twenty-first century novels

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I.

The four novels discussed here were all published within four years of one another, and they all tell the same story.

The story is always a journey from either West to East, or East to West, or in one case, journeys in both directions. A major strand in each of them is the quest for a mysterious religious object whose possession is bitterly contested and whose nature is open to interpretation. All of them end with an achievement of the quest which is in some way empty. Each of them deals with a clash of civilizations, with wandering and displaced persons, and states, or strongly implies, the necessity for religious tolerance and the dangers of bigotry, will-to-power and greed, but beyond this we also have a sense of what motivates a quest, and also of the human resilience which can make us pick ourselves up and go on once our dreams are shattered. They are all wholly or partially set in the past, or in one case in an otherworld of magic, and yet all are, to an extent, motivated by contemporary concerns related to the so-called 'clash of civilisations' and, finally, all display an element of brutal realism.

The novels in question are *Balthasar's Odyssey* by Amin Maalouf, *The Brotherhood of the Holy Shroud* by Julia Navarro, *The Whale Road* by Robert Low, and *Cairo. A Graphic Novel* by G. Willow Wilson. The similarities of plot are all the more striking considering a number of obvious differences between the texts and their authors. These are fairly dissimilar works in terms of style and, one might add, status. Maalouf is an established modern classic, Navarro's book is an international bestseller written in what is usually referred to as a bestseller style, Low's is a fine *début* novel, but likely to be consigned to the genre of historical or war fiction, whilst Willow Wilson's is basically a comic strip, with very fine graphics by M. K. Perker. Navarro's novel is originally written in Spanish, Maalouf's in

French, the others in English, with a little transliterated Arabic added in the case of Willow Wilson, and a little Scots and Old Norse in the case of Robert Low.

The religious and national affiliations of the authors are more diverse and complicated, though complicated in a sense which is becoming increasingly normal in our times.

Willow Wilson was born in New Jersey in 1982, converted to Islam while studying history and Arabic at Boston university, then moved to Cairo, where she worked as a freelance journalist and became the first Western writer to interview the current Mufti of Egypt; Perker, the graphic artist, however, moved in the opposite direction: he was born in Istanbul and now lives in New York – his religious beliefs are not stated. Maalouf, on the other hand, as is well-known, is a Lebanese author of Christian background who has lived in France since 1976. In his book, *On Identity*, he emphasises that he feels equally Lebanese and French, *not* half French and half Lebanese, and states that ‘the fact of simultaneously being Christian and having as my mother tongue Arabic, the holy language of Islam, is one of the basic paradoxes which has shaped my identity.’ (Maalouf, 2000, p. 14) Explaining his religious affiliation in more detail, he explains that he comes from a family which is Melchite or Greek Catholic on his mother’s side, and Protestant on his father’s (with a Turkish grandmother who married a Maronite Christian from Egypt for good measure): he also explains that he considers himself a believer though he is ‘indifferent to dogma and sceptical about certain attitudes’; for him a believer ‘is simply someone who has faith in certain values. And I would reduce all these to a single one: human dignity. The rest is hope or myth’. (Malouf, 2000, pp. 47-48)

One can only infer the religious affiliations of Navarro and Low from the texts themselves: Navarro, Spanish journalist turned novelist, gives us a narrative voice which ultimately comes across as that of a believing Christian though there is nothing heavy-handed about this, and most of her main characters are best described as Catholic agnostics. Low, a

Scottish journalist turned novelist seems sceptical in matters of religion: at least he gives us a pagan narrator, a number of highly unscrupulous Christian characters and a sense of the way in which political and economic forces shape the rise and fall of religions.

II.

To return to the texts themselves: *Cairo A Graphic Novel* is the work which most explicitly addresses political troubles in the Middle East and conflict between Islam and the West/Israel. An evil druglord and magician called Nar, abetted by no less an accomplice than Iblis himself, battles with a jinn called Shams for possession of a box containing the word 'East' in one of the divine languages. Shams find unlikely allies in Kate, a naïve American girl who wants to get away from 'self-obsessed First World crap' (Wilson, 2007, no page number) in Orange County and Shaheed, a Lebanese-American would-be suicide bomber who flew into Cairo on the same plane, plus Tova, a female Jewish soldier who makes it into Cairo after being wounded in an anti-drug operation in the Sinai; Ashraf, an engaging hashish dealer and Ali, a frustrated opposition journalist who is in love with Salma, Ashraf's dancing-girl sister but reluctant to risk his family's disapproval and marry her.

The adventure includes an episode in the otherworld of the Under Nile where Iblis tempts the American girl and the journalist to hate and even attempt to kill each other with stones but they are saved by the prayers of the jinn and, in true Islamic fashion, stone Satan instead. In the end, the box is recovered but turns out to be empty. What it actually contained was the word *East* in 'the divine language of absence'. (Wilson, 2007, no page number)

Shams tells Shaheed: "It means whatever those to whom the box is given wish it to mean. For three hundred years the box belonged to people who didn't live in the East, who judged it and bought it and sold it from far away; who feared it and diminished it. I recovered the box fifty years ago, but it has been in danger ever since. The task has passed to you. Give the word back to the people who live it. Find someone who can speak it truthfully. And kiddo, if you

love me, don't hate the people who misused it.” (Wilson, 2007, no page number) He also tells him that when he opened the box his name changed from Shaheed, the martyr, to Shahid, the witness. Nar then kills Shams in revenge for his disappointment, but Shams gives his ‘fireself’ to Shahid who becomes a *junayn* – half inn and half human and therefore in a unique position to resist Nar. He then gives the box to Ali who seems to understand the invisible word and says that ‘Cairo will read again.’ (Wilson, 2007, no page number)

There is, one might argue, a rather messy contradiction at the heart of the book: the fact that the box is presented both as dangerous if it falls into the wrong hands and useless to those who open it with bad faith. The message of forgiveness is also rather undercut in a manner both childish and sinister by the fact that when Nar begs Shahid to forgive him, he responds “You know its funny, but I do ...Which is why I'll let you die quickly and in peace” (Wilson, 2007, no page number) - and then promptly uses his newfound *junayn* powers of manipulating probability to make him drop dead of a heart attack.

However, if we suspend our cynicism as much as possible and read the story on its own terms we have a tale of redemption, and of a conversion to a kind of liberalism. At the end of the novel, Shahid, having renounced terrorism, is ‘studying at a madrasa. A real one with good teachers. My sheikh is a woman. I'm learning that holy books change depending on who reads them. There's a lot of stuff I thought was black and white that – isnt’’. (Wilson, 2007, no page number)

The quest then turns out to be not altogether empty. Shams had previously quoted a man he claimed as his former pupil, the Mevlana: ‘Your boundaries are your quest’ (Wilson, 2007, no page number), and all the characters make progress in transcending their limitations: even Ashraf ponders giving up dealing hashish in favour of smuggling antiquities. To complete the feel-good factor we have two happy romantic endings, as Ali finally finds the courage to propose to Salma, and Tova, having returned to Israel and apparently left Ashraf

forever, returns in disguise, on the forty-day anniversary of Shams's death, her Israeli armyboots poking out from under her Islamic dress. She then tears off her veil and throws herself into Ashraf's arms in a final tableau which leaves conservative onlookers scandalised.

III.

There is no such happy ending to Julia Navarro's *The Brotherhood of the Holy Shroud*, in which the romantic hopes of the two main female characters, Sofia and Ana, are doomed to disappointment and the enigmatic male characters who attract them, the Templar businessman Umberto D'Alaqua and the Templar priest Yves de Charny, are not only unattainable to the point of being vowed to celibacy, but commit themselves to a course of action which ends with Ana buried alive in the tunnels under Rome and Sofia crippled in an orchestrated traffic accident. Here the quest followed paradoxically concerns an object which we all think we *have* located: the alleged shroud of Christ known as the Turin shroud.

Navarro interleaves three different narratives: the story of the fate of the shroud in the years immediately after the death of Christ which brings it to Edessa, now Urfa; the story of its removal from East to West in the time of the Knights Templar and of the downfall of the Templars in the time of Jacques de Molay, and lastly a detective story set in contemporary Italy as a group of police and art historians seek to unravel strange events involving break-ins, fires and the corpses of tongueless men found in Turin Cathedral.

The sacred object in question is more complicated than at first thought, since the second story lets us know that there are in fact two shrouds and the one preserved in Turin is in fact a photographic negative of the original, imprinted on a cloth used by the Templar priest, François de Charney, to carry the original from the Holy Land to France: this accounts for the Turin shroud being carbon-dated to the thirteenth or fourteenth-century but containing traces of pollen which are much older. (The original shroud, we understand, has passed into the keeping of the Scottish Templars.) The solution of the modern-day detective story leads

us again to the East, tracing the way in which the Community of the Shroud, a Christian sect from Urfa, locked in a centuries-old conflict with the Knights Templar, commits a series of murders in an attempt to recover possession of the shroud, only to meet with failure and for its leader, Addaio, to commit suicide, belatedly realising how far fixation with the relic has taken him from the essence of Christianity: ‘the simple acceptance of God’s will, was the true legacy of the shroud, a legacy that had always been theirs to embrace.’ (Navarro, 2007, p. 486) Their adversaries, the Templars, become involved in almost the same level of moral turpitude, and d’Alaqua’s announcement of his intention to retire from the order is insufficient to redeem his guilt. Sofia has solved the mystery and unmasked the clandestine activities of the Templars, but they are so deeply infiltrated into the establishment that her whistle-blowing will be ignored. The only hope that we are left with at the end of the novel is her determination to get on with her life as she leaves d’Alaqua, the man whom she now loves and loathes in equal measure:

She limped down the steps without looking back, but she felt D’Alqua’s eyes on her and knew that no one has any power over the past, that the past cannot be changed, that the present is a reflection of what we were, and that there is only a future if you never take a single step back.

(Navarro, 2007, p.496)

IV

In Maalouf’s novel, the deeply unedifying spectacle of Christians in conflict over their own relics is replaced by the strange phenomenon of a Christian in fervent pursuit of an Islamic text. *Balthasar’s Odyssey* is set in and around the year 1666, seen by many at the time as the Year of the Beast which would herald the end of the world. Amid rumours of the apocalypse, the hero, a worldly and sceptical Christian Lebanese of Genoese origins, by the name of Balthasar Embriaco, comes to possess a rare book which he then finds himself obliged to sell to a French envoy before he is able to read it. This is no other than the famous

text by the Arabic author Abu-Maher al-Mazandarani, allegedly containing the hundredth secret name of God. His quest to recover it takes him from the Levant via Istanbul to London: the book repeatedly eludes his grasp and seems to attract disaster, especially fire: and it is from the Great Fire of London that he finally flees England with the book in hand. However, he has already made the discovery that when he attempts to read it, it is as if his eyes darken and he never discovers the Hundredth Name itself. The quest for the book is counterpointed with meditations on religious truth and toleration, and with his love affair with Marta, a woman from his hometown, and their joint quest to prove that her husband is dead so that they can marry. This ends in tragedy as her husband, a brigand and a lout, turns out to be alive and she chooses to return to him. However, Embriaco finds consolation, first in the arms of the English landlady, Bess, and finally in the prospect of marriage to the young daughter of a wealthy Genoese family and of a return to the city of his origins. The story ends with the dawn of the year 1667 and the realisation that rumours of the end of the world were somewhat premature. Balthasar sums up the result of his journey:

I shan't open it again. Tomorrow I shall leave it discreetly on a shelf in some bookshop, so that one day, years hence, other hands may take it up and other eyes look avidly into it, eyes which may by then be able to read it.

In pursuit of this book I have crossed the world over land and sea, but if I were to sum up my peregrinations as the year 1666 is left behind, I'd say I've only gone a roundabout way from Gibelet to Genoa.

(Maalouf, 2003, p. 391)

Again the quest has been empty, yet not entirely in vain.

V.

ar all our sacred quests have concerned Christian or Islamic sacred objects. However, with *The Whale Road* we have a new twist as the object in question is both Christian and pagan, mystical and extremely material.

In this narrative, set in and around 965 AD, the narrator, Orm, journeys with the Oathsworn, a predominantly pagan crew of Vikings from Norway to the steppe near the Khazar fortress of Sarkel in search of the silver of Attila the Hun. They succeed in breaking into his burial chamber only to meet with disappointment, betrayal and tragedy. Their path is a complex one, as is the nature of the treasure they find.

They had been initially 'commissioned' by the Christian but extremely unscrupulous leader of the town of Birka to raid a monastery in Strathclyde and bring away a text related to Attila's treasure. Discovering that they are being deceived in this matter, they carry away from Birka a Finnish captive called Hild and a proto-Machiavellian monk called Martin. Orm falls in love with Hild but fears her strangeness. Hild leads them to the ancient forge mountain of her Carelian village, the mountain to which she, like her mother before her, should have been sacrificed as was the fate of all the female bloodline of the ancient smiths. Inside the mountain is an artefact which makes both the pagan *godi* or priest and the Christian monk kneel in worship: a broken spear protected by a new runespell.

The *godi* kneels to the runespell; the monk kneels because he believes this to be the shaft of the spear which was plunged in Christ's side, the point of which was later fashioned into a sword for Attila, an artefact coveted by Christian and pagan alike, not least for its reputed ability to confer invincibility in battle. Hild then undertakes to take them to Attila's howe, which after many adventures including a detour in which she takes revenge on another group of Vikings who have raped her by arranging to have them massacred in the tomb of Attila's son Dengizik, she does, though many lives are lost on the way. The silver, said to be

the silver of the Volsungs taken from the cursed hoard of the wyrm Fafnir, is there. However, once inside, it is as if Hild is transformed into the ghost or fetch of Attila's bride Ildico who was buried alive in the tomb as a punishment for having murdered him on their wedding night. She takes Attila's mythical sword and attempts to kill all the members of the Oathsworn who have ventured inside. Only Orm is able to oppose her since he has put his hand on the twin of the sword: the only blade which can resist it unbroken. Meanwhile the tomb begins to be flooded and he realises that it was not as he thought *once* under a lake, but always under a lake after rainfall. He manages to escape both Hild and the rising water and Hild's frantic slashings with the sword bring down the supports of the tunnel on top of her and she is buried alive: the very ancestral fate for which she was taking revenge.

The complete failure of the quest for treasure is symbolised by one of the remaining company throwing back the only piece of silver that he has as an offering to the dead. However, Orm is then chosen as the new leader of the Oathsworn and it turns out that he has enough silver remaining in his boots for him to make the transition from raiding to trading. Yet he understands that this will not be the end of the matter and that his companions are longing to return to the hoard.

It was what they did - what we were. The fear they had felt just weeks before had eased, leaving only the lure of what was still out there to be found. You could not be a Northman, have the knowledge of a mountain of silver and simply leave it there.

(Low, 2007, p. 334)

So we understand that there will be a sequel. And indeed there is: in fact, we have the first chapter of Low's second novel included at the end of the book. In it, we find Orm has arrived in Miklagard, the Great City, otherwise known as Constantinople, only to be robbed of Attila's runesword. We understand that he will embark on another quest to find it ... As in the

other novels, the empty quest is never quite empty, and the hero, despite his moral imperfections, is resilient enough to salvage his own sense of identity and integrity.

VI

The myth of the empty quest is no new invention; its origins go back as far as *Gilgamesh* at least. Given the human condition, there is nothing strange in the fact that we should tell stories of endeavour ending in total or partial failure, or of the gods apparently punishing us by granting our wishes. However, the objects of the empty box, the dark unreadable book, the blessed and cursed sword, even the strange ambivalent nature of the shroud function as metaphors bringing together in a strange synthesis our distrust of and enduring fascination with the sacred. All four narratives have an appeal for those of us who fluctuate between understanding the emptiness of the sacred object in terms of pure nihilism or as a sacred nothingness, perhaps to be equated with a dark night of the soul which is only a fleeting stage in the mystic's quest for union with the divine. The themes of religious conflict, of competing world-views and the possibilities for co-existence, though far from unique to our times, also resonate especially strongly given the political preoccupations of the opening decade of the twenty-first century. In linking these issues to the universal theme of the quest, the authors have given us chivalric romances for our own uncertain times.

VII.

This contemporary relevance has been intensified by events which have taken place since the publication of these novels, notably the events of the Arab Spring, the ultimate outcome of which still hangs in the balance. The myth of the partially fulfilled quest may also be applied to revolutions whose aims may initially appear to be thwarted, but which have nevertheless demonstrated, through numerous individual acts of selflessness and heroism, that, *contra* Burke, dedicated revolutionaries may be virtuous men – and women.

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