

FINAL ANSWERS

À la mémoire de Simone Vauthier

Just before she died, Gertrude Stein asked, “What is the answer?”
No answer came. She laughed and said, “In that case, what is the question?”

Then she died.

Donald Sutherland, *Gertrude Stein*

On April 19 1616, the day after having been given the extreme unction, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra penned a dedication of his last book, *The Labours of Persiles and Segismunda*, to Don Pedro Fernández de Castro, Count of Lemos, a novel which, in his opinion, “dares to compete with Heliodorus”: Heliodorus was a Greek novelist, once famous and now forgotten, whose *Aethiopica* Cervantes much admired. Three or four days later (historians remain undecided) Cervantes died, leaving his widow in charge of publishing the *Persiles*. His *Quixote*, if we can credit at least in part the modest disclaimer placed at the beginning of the first volume, was for Cervantes something lamentably minor. “What could this barren and ill-cultivated spirit of mine produce but the story of a dry, wizened son, whimsical and full of all manner of notions never before conceived?” he asks the reader. On his deathbed, intent on judging his own labours, Cervantes concludes that the *Persiles*, or perhaps his long poetic unfinished *Galatea*, is to be his literary testament. Readers have decided otherwise and it is *Don Quixote* that lives on as our contemporary, while the rest of Cervantes’s work has largely become fodder for scholars. Don Quixote now stands for the whole of Cervantes’s work, and perhaps for Cervantes himself.

Like Cervantes, we are mostly unaware of our destiny. Cursed with consciousness, we understand that we are on this earth on a journey that, like all journeys, must have had a beginning and will no doubt reach an end, but when was the first step taken and which will be the last, where are we meant to be travelling to and why, and in expectation of what results, are questions that remain implacably unanswered. We can console

ourselves, like Don Quixote himself, with the conviction that our goodwill and noble suffering mysteriously justify our being alive, and that through our actions we play a role that holds the secret universe together. But consolation is not reassurance.

Jews believe that thirty-six righteous men, the Lamed Wufniks, justify the world before God. Each man does not know that he is a Lamed Wufnik and neither does he know the identity of the other thirty-five but, for reasons clear only to God, his existence prevents this world from crumbling into dust. Perhaps there is no act, however minuscule or trite, that does not accomplish a similar purpose. Perhaps each of our lives (and that of every insect, every tree, every cloud) stands like a letter in a text whose meaning depends on a certain sequence of appearing and disappearing letters, in a story whose beginning we ignore and whose end we will not read. If the letter L in this paragraph had consciousness, it might then ask itself the same questions and, unable to follow the page on which it is written, equally receive no answers.

Not knowing what they are meant to do but feeling they must know when they have done it: this paradox haunts artists from the beginning of time. Artists have always been aware that they engage (or have been recruited for) a task whose ultimate purport must escape them. They may realize, sometimes, that they have achieved something without understanding exactly what or how, or may guess that they are on the verge of achieving something that will however escape them, or that they have been allotted a task defined by the very impossibility of being achieved. Countless unfinished monuments, paintings, symphonies and novels testify to their artistic hubris; a few others bravely proclaim that accomplishment is (though rarely) also within the human scope.

Somewhere halfway through *La Prisonnière*, Marcel learns that the writer Bergotte has died after a visit to the museum to see Vermeer's "View of Delft". A critic had commented on "a small patch of yellow wall" so perfectly painted that, if seen on its own, it appeared to possess "a self-sufficient beauty". Bergotte, who thinks he knows the painting well, painfully undertakes the journey to fix his gaze on the little patch, in spite

of being told by his doctor to stay in bed. “This is how I should have written,” he laments, before collapsing. Bergotte has recognized in a tiny section of one of Vermeer’s paintings an achievement such as he himself has never attained and, with this atrocious realisation, dies. The scene depicted by Proust is cautionary. The contemplation of a success, of a work of art that in and of itself suffices, offers a reference against which an artist can measure his own work and learn his own fate, not in absolute terms, of course, but in the particular situation in which that other work has affected him. Now he knows what he means by reaching (or not reaching) a sort of perfection, and whether to continue or to stop.

In this sense, not all interruption is lack of success. When Kafka abandons his *Castle* before the formal conclusion of the story, when Gaudi dies before completing the Church of the Sagrada Familia, when Mahler jots down only the first parts of his *Tenth Symphony*, when Michelangelo refuses to work further on his Florence *Pietà*, it is we, the audience, not the artist, who might consider the labours half-done. For the creator the result might be sketchy indeed, truncated yes, but not insufficient, like Vermeer’s little patch of yellow isolated in the viewer’s eye.

Rimbaud interrupted his poetic career at the age of nineteen; J.D. Salinger wrote no more stories after 1963; the Argentine poet Enrique Banchs brought out his last book in 1911 and then lived on for another 57 years without publishing a single new verse. We don’t know whether these artists felt, at a certain moment, the epiphany that they had achieved what they were meant to achieve, and could therefore retire from the scene on which they felt they had no further business. Certainly, from our distance as readers, their work seems self-sufficient, mature, perfect. But did the artists see it as such?

Few are the artists who recognize their own genius without hyperbole or constricting modesty. The paradigm is Dante who, in writing his great poem, knows that it is great and tells the reader it is so. For most others, however, the learning of the craft never ceases and no resulting work is fully achieved. Witness the following confession:

“From the age of six I felt the compulsion to draw the shape of things. In my fifties, I showed a collection of drawings but nothing accomplished before I turned seventy satisfies me. Only at seventy-three was I able to intuit, even approximately, the true form and nature of birds, fish and plants. Therefore, by the age of eighty I will have made great progress; at ninety I will have penetrated the essence of all things; at a hundred, I will no doubt have ascended to a higher state, indescribable, and if I live to be one hundred and ten years old, everything, every dot and every line, will live. I invite those who will live as long as I to hold me to my promise. Written in my seventy-fifth year by myself, formerly known as Hokusai, now called Huakivo-Royi, the old man maddened by drawing.”

Whether the artist has abandoned his creative career or pursued it until his last breath has been drawn, whether he feels that something of what he has done will survive his dust and ashes, or whether he is certain that his work is, as Ecclesiastes warns us, nothing but “vanity and vexation of spirit”, it is we, the audience, who continue to seek in what has been created and set before us a certain order of merit, an aesthetic, moral or philosophical hierarchy. We think we know better.

Our arrogance, however, makes an assumption that is perhaps not tenable: that there is one among the works of Corot, of Shakespeare, of Verdi, that sublimates all others, a work for which all the rest must seem as preparations or drafts, a culminating work, a crowning achievement. In one of his short stories, Henry James put forward the notion that there is indeed a theme, a subject, a signature that runs through any artist’s work like the repeated and yet hidden figure in a carpet. The notion of a “testamentary” work that encapsulates the artist’s summation and legacy is like James’s “figure in the carpet”, but without the carpet.

Because our knowledge of the world is fragmentary, we believe the world to be fragmentary. We assume that the bits and pieces we encounter and collect (of experience, pleasure, sorrow, revelation) exist in splendid isolation like each of the motes in a cloud of stardust. We forget the all-

encompassing cloud, we forget that in the beginning there was a star. *Don Quixote* or *Hamlet* might be the testamentary works of Cervantes and of Shakespeare, Picasso could have put away his brushes after *Guernica* and Rembrandt after *The Night Watch*, Mozart could have died happily having composed *The Magic Flute* and Verdi after *Falstaff*, but we would be missing something. We would be missing the approximations, the tentative versions, the variations, the changes of tone and perspective, the circuitous itineraries, the circumventions, the dealings in the shadows, the rest of their creative universe. We would be missing the errors, the stillbirths, the censored snapshots, the trimmings, the lesser inspired creations. Since we are not immortal, we have to content ourselves with a sampling, and therefore the choice of testamentary works is fully justified. As long as we remember that, under the pomp and circumstance, there is a rustle and a stirring, a vast, dark, rich forestfull of fallen or discarded leaves.