



Dream Projects

**in Theatre,
Novels and
Films**

*The Works of
Paul Claudel,
Jean Genet, and
Federico Fellini*

YEHUDA MORALY



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Introduction

In his short story *Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu* (*The Unknown Masterpiece*, 1832) Balzac depicts the young Nicolas Poussin, at the start of his career, coming to visit a famous painter, François Porbus. In the latter's studio he meets an enigmatic old man, Maître Frenhofer, a great expert on painting, who launches into a learned critique of one of Porbus's paintings. Maître Frenhofer is not only a great theoretician but also an outstanding artist who succeeds in bringing to life the painting he criticises with only a few touches of the paint brush.

Arriving at Maître Frenhofer's house, Nicolas Poussin discovers wonderful paintings which are nothing, says the mysterious artist, compared with his great work, *La Belle Noiseuse*, a picture he refuses to show anyone because he regards it as still unfinished:

'Show you my work?' exclaimed the old man, in consternation. 'No, no, I must still perfect it. Yesterday, towards evening, I thought that I had finished. Her eyes seemed moist, her flesh stirred. The locks of her hair waved freely. She was breathing! Although I managed to use a flat canvas to depict the relief of nature in the round, this morning by the light of day I discovered my error.[...] Just think, too much knowledge, like too much ignorance, leads to a dead end. I have such doubts about my work!' [...] 'I've been working on this for ten years now, young man, but what are ten short years when the problem is a struggle with nature?'¹

Three months later, *La Belle Noiseuse* is still not finished. Maître Frenhofer is going through a period of deep discouragement.

The poor man was quite simply worn out from trying to finish his mysterious painting.²

When Porbus and Poussin are finally allowed to enter the studio they see masterpieces. However, the old man tells them, these are only sketches for *La Belle Noiseuse*, failures. When Maître Frenhofer eventually shows them the picture he has been working on day and night for ten years, all they can see is a jumble of lines.





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'Do you see anything?' Poussin asked Porbus.

'No. And you?'

'Nothing. [...] All I can see in it is a confused mass of colours inside a multitude of weird lines, a wall of paint.'³

The story ends tragically. Unable to finish his painting, which he has 'perfected' to the point where it is only a confused mass of colours, Maître Frenhofer burns his entire works and kills himself.

Other fictional narratives, dramas and films depict an artist at the mercy of a work he is unable to complete; constantly deferred and failed attempts bring him to the verge of death or madness. The most famous is, of course, Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*). The whole series of volumes gives us a Narrator who dreams of writing a sublime work, which, however, he is always unable to create. Only at the end of the sequence, in the very last lines of *Le Temps retrouvé* (*Time Regained*), during the party given by Gilberte de Saint-Loup, does he find the way to write this work, which turns out to be the very one we have just read.

Federico Fellini – or, more accurately, his screenwriter Ennio Flaiano who had worked on a film adaptation of *À la recherche* – adopts this same formula for the celebrated *Otto e mezzo* (*Eight and a Half*, 1963). Throughout the film the director Guido Anselmi keeps striving unsuccessfully to write the screenplay for a film whose sets are already built and actors already under contract. Just as in *À la recherche*, we have to wait until the end for Guido to find a way of realising his work, which is of course the one we have just been watching.

In Louis Malle's *My Dinner with André* (1981) the theatre director André Gregory goes to the Sahara to create a stage production of *Le Petit Prince* (*The Little Prince*). He is unable to do so. The whole film relates the period of artistic and personal crisis which brings him to the edge of insanity.

In real life, too, artistic creation frequently, if not – at some point or another – inevitably, entails battling with a work dreamed of but which remains forever unrealised. My aim in this study is to demonstrate that this is a kind of law.

Oftentimes, an artist dreams of a project, starting and then abandoning it, taking it up again, only for this dream project to remain forever out of reach. In *Mallarmé et le mystère du "Livre"* (*Mallarmé and the Mystery of the "Book"*) Éric Benoit traces the history of the versions of the 'livre total', the writing of which occupied Mallarmé from 1866 until 1892, before he destroyed all the drafts. At the outset in 1866 Mallarmé is clearly full of enthusiasm:





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I have laid down the foundations of a magnificent work. Every man has a Secret inside him, many die without finding it, and will never find it because once they are dead it will no longer exist any more than they will. I have died and been resuscitated with the jewelled key to my final spiritual casket. It is up to me now to open it in the absence of any borrowed impression. It will need twenty years during which I will cloister myself up inside myself, renouncing all publicity but reading it to my friends. I am working at everything at one time, or rather I mean that everything is so well ordered inside me that now as a sensation occurs it is transfigured and of its own accord places itself in such or such a book or poem. Once a poem is ripe it will come away. You will observe that I am imitating the law of nature.⁴

The first sketch of these ‘three verse poems and four prose poems on the spiritual conception of *le néant*’⁵ was finished the following year in 1867. Mallarmé appears extremely satisfied with it:

Yesterday I finished the first draft of the work, perfectly set out and imperishable, if I do not perish. I contemplated it with neither horror nor ecstasy and, closing my eyes, I saw that it was. The Venus de Milo [...], Leonardo’s Mona Lisa seem to me, and are, the two great scintillating apparitions of Beauty on this earth – and this Work, such as I dream of it, the third. [...] Once the work is complete, I do not mind about dying; quite the contrary, I shall need so much rest.⁶

Mallarmé did not publish the text, however. Almost twenty years later he was to write to Verlaine:

I have always dreamed of and attempted something else, with the patience of the alchemist, prepared to sacrifice to it all vanity and all satisfaction, the way people used to burn their furniture and roof beams to feed the furnace of the Grand Oeuvre. What exactly? It is hard to say: a book, quite simply, in many volumes, a book which would be a book, architectural and premeditated, not a collection of chance inspirations, no matter how wonderful . . . I will go further and say: **the** Book, convinced as I am that there is only one, attempted unwittingly by whoever has written, even the Geniuses. The Orphic explanation of the Earth, which is the sole duty of the poet and the literary *jeu* par excellence [...].

I here confess my vice, laying it bare, dear friend, a vice which I have rejected a thousand times, my spirit weary and bruised. I am possessed by it, however, and perhaps I shall succeed, not in creating this work in its entirety (I do not know who one would have to be to do that) but in





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showing one fragment completed, in allowing its glorious authenticity to gleam in but one place, indicating all the rest for which one life would be insufficient. To prove by the completed segments that this book exists and that I have known that which I shall not have been able to complete.⁷

At a later date the project developed in the direction of 'lectures'.

First of all, a word about the grand project mentioned for this year on my card. My dear fellow, I shall be appearing in public towards October, you understand, to perform a juggling act with the contents of a book: it would take infinitely too long to talk about this in ink.⁸

In the autumn of that year, 1888, the project was postponed to the following year. Paul Valéry recalls 'the room in the rue de Rome where behind an old tapestry there lay until his death, at which point they were to be destroyed, the packets of his notes, the secret material for his great unrealised work'.⁹

Ten years later, before his death, Mallarmé was indeed to ask that all the notes for his great unrealised work be destroyed. To Henri de Régnier he writes:

You shall come to Valvins and we shall dig a hole in the middle of a field and bury all this sorrowful paper. We shall make a tomb for all this paper which contains so much of my life.¹⁰

The example of Mallarmé's book is famous but an examination of the artistic adventure of a creator (poet, dramatist, painter or film maker) often reveals the existence of a similar project, dreamed of for a long time and forever uncompleted. In the monologue of Trigorin, the writer in *The Seagull*, we can see traces of Chekhov's longing for the narrative work he always dreamed of but was never able to write. In order to realise this book, which was to have been his masterpiece, Chekhov would travel to the depths of human misery, the penal colony of Sakhalin. The outcome was disappointing but this descent into hell left its mark on his entire creative work. Are not his plays and short stories, like the book about the penal colony, an attempt to express absolute suffering? Similarly, on the morning of the day he died, Pirandello was still thinking about the décor for *The Mountain Giants*, the play he worked on over a long period from 1928 to 1936 without finishing it. To his favourite interpreter of his works, Marta Abba, he writes 'I truly believe I am in the process of writing [...] my masterpiece'.¹¹ And his son testifies to Pirandello's final artistic efforts, which went towards completing this play:





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My father [...] was haunted by these phantoms for almost the entire second-last night of his life, so much so that the next morning he told me he had had to undergo the horrendous effort of composing the whole third act in his head and that, now all the difficulties were resolved, he hoped to be able to rest a little, particularly as he was now happy that immediately he was recovered he could write down in a few days all that he had conceived during these hours.¹²

It might well be then that an artist's dream project constitutes the centre, the key, to his oeuvre. The unfinished project of Mallarmé's *Livre* illuminates the poet's undertaking far better than his published poetry. First it is necessary to do what was done in the case of Mallarmé: reconstruct the projects and their evolution with the help of notes, drafts, interviews and letters. Then they must be considered alongside the rest of the published works to show how the unfinished project sheds light on the meaning of all the others.

In this study I shall make use of three drafts by three artists on whom I have already worked. Paul Claudel never succeeded in his intention to add a fourth part to his Coûfontaine trilogy which he considered incomplete: this would have been a dialogue between a blind Jewish mother and a daughter who had taken the veil. The *Journal* reveals him about to be able to write this dialogue, and his works contain many echoes of it, equally unfinished.

Jean Genet spent almost twenty years, 1948 to 1967, contemplating a project, *La Mort (Death)*, working on it non-stop, without publishing it. Sartre, at the conclusion of his 1952 *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr (Saint Genet, actor and martyr)*, announces the new book.¹³ Two years later, in 1954, Genet published *Fragments* of his great work in *Les Temps Modernes*, describing its principal aspects.¹⁴ Correspondence with his agent and translator Bernard Frechtman reveals the evolution of the project, some drafts of which survive, in addition to the *Fragments*. Genet was not to finish the text but an understanding of the uncompleted project sheds light on his dramatic works as well as on his theoretical or political writings.

In Fellini's case, the twists and turns in the long-delayed shooting of the *Viaggio di G. Mastorna (The Journey of G. Mastorna)* have passed into legend. In *Otto e mezzo* (1963), Fellini depicted a film director who was unable to make a film whose actors were already signed up and huge sets already built. A few years later real life imitated fiction. Fellini collaborated with Dino Buzzati and Brunello Rondi on a screenplay about the realm of the dead (*Il viaggio di G. Mastorna*). Just as in the imaginary scenario in *Otto e mezzo*, the preparations for shooting are very well





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advanced. The enormous sets are ready. Thousands of costumes have been made. The actors' contracts are signed. And then to the despair of producer Dino De Laurentiis, Fellini abandoned the project.

The film maker was to return often to the *Viaggio di G. Mastorna* without ever succeeding in finishing it. He rewrote the screenplay with other screenwriters, Bernardino Zapponi and Tonino Guerra. The American film director Mike Nichols offered him a million dollars for the screen rights. Fellini refused because he still believed he would one day be able to make it himself. In his final months he even agreed to its becoming a graphic novel by Milo Manara, in which we see the start of the great work which meant so much to Fellini but which he never managed to complete.

There survive from the project the screenplay published after Fellini's death by his biographer, Tullio Kezich (*Il viaggio di G. Mastorna*, Bompiani, 1995), a lengthy letter-synopsis reproduced in a book by Dario Zanelli, *L'inferno immaginario di Federico Fellini*, an earlier version of the script – kindly shown to me by Brunello Rondi's son, Umberto Rondi – and a short film Fellini made for American television, *Fellini: a Director's notebook* (1969) in which he recounts his strange creative adventure. A film by Maite Carpio, *Il misterioso viaggio di Federico Fellini* (2003), brings together interviews with some of the collaborators on the unfinished project. In June 2013 Florence Colombani made a programme for France-Culture devoted to the *Voyage de G. Mastorna* in which she interviews French experts on Fellini and the artist Milo Manara. In September 2013 the publisher Sonatine brought out a slightly fictionalised version of the screenplay, with ~~by~~ a preface by Aldo Tassone and an afterword by Ermanno Cavazzoni. The same year, *The Journey of G. Mastorna: The Film Fellini Didn't Make* was published in English with a preface by Peter Bondanella along with extensive commentary by the English translator, Marcus Perryman.

For each of the three projects my approach will be the same. First I will attempt to reconstruct the different stages of the unfinished work with the aid of drafts and testimony. The reconstruction allows us to witness the process of creation itself, from the birth of the idea through its ripening to the different versions of the project and then to its abandonment, or sometimes its abandonments since the author may come back to the project from a different angle before leaving it once more.

Next I will trace direct echoes of the project in the overall *oeuvre*, the recurrence of images and themes. Finally I will attempt the most difficult part: establishing a link between the abandoned project and the overall work, thereby shedding new light on this.





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It may seem surprising that creative figures as different as Claudel, Genet and Fellini should appear alongside one another. However, I draw on the theatre, literature and cinema with the sole purpose of providing examples of the hypothesis I am trying to prove: namely that an artist's dream project, the one they long to produce and always abandon, is at the centre of a creative adventure which may well by its very nature be inexpressible.

