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ARTICLE

# Invisible Layers: Palimpsestuous Meanings in Art Novels

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This article analyses a paradox in three art novels: Honoré de Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece* (1831), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and Siegfried Lenz's *The German Lesson* (1968): the narrative of each of these literary texts revolves around artworks that are partly or completely invisible to the reader and to most of the protagonists, yet they have been considered a reflection of aesthetic debates of their time, and have inspired artists to strongly identify with their main characters. At the crossroads between literature studies and art history, Paul Cézanne claimed a kinship with the fictional painter of Balzac's *Unknown Masterpiece*, noting: 'I am Frenhofer', while in German post-war culture, the expressionist Emil Nolde was associated with his fictional alter ego Max Ludwig Nansen, as portrayed in *The German Lesson*. These will be treated as examples of literature which impact on the scholarly and popular reception of the artist, to the point of 'painting over' a reality. In a palimpsestuous reading of these texts, the poetic act of naming and describing art substitutes itself for ekphrases made impossible by the absence of referent. This substitution, as an alternative way to ascertain and produce several simultaneous layers of meaning, reveals itself in the gradual layering of age on Dorian Gray's portrait in Wilde's eponymous novel, while Master Frenhofer's final cry of 'Nothing on my canvas!' points to a dichotomy of absence and presence coexisting in the painting in its textual form. The mental process triggered by these ekphrases thus becomes the verbal representation of an impossible visual representation, and trains the mind to envisage the possibility of the verbal representation, or at least the formulation of visual *abstraction*, in future encounters with forms of art disconnected from the real.

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## Introduction

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the visual arts became an essential source of inspiration for novelists: as a recurring theme, they fed into the Romantic myth of an artistic unity and served as a prism through which to explore the visual and textual boundaries of realistic representation and, with the advent of modernism, to transcend these limits (Melmoux-Montaubin, 1999: 19–27). In particular, the *Künstlerroman* ('artist's novel') – initially a subgenre of the German *Bildungsroman*, which follows the intellectual development of a character – and later the modernist art novel, were part of literature's evolving response to the principle of *ut pictura poesis* ('as is painting so is poetry'). Horace's rhetorical analogy can be interpreted in terms of processes: in the same way that, to quote Paul Klee, art – and painting in particular – 'does not reproduce the visible, rather, it makes visible' (Klee, 2013 [1920]: 28), art novels make artistic creation 'readable', in the sense that they demand a 'double reading', a pendular movement between the words on the page and the image of the artwork as it is taking shape in the mind (Louvel, 2002: 12).

The potency of the aesthetic correspondence fostered by art novels is often illustrated by an anecdote about Balzac's *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* (*The Unknown Masterpiece*, 1831–1846), related by Émile Bernard in his memories of fellow painter Paul Cézanne. Bernard describes a scene where, while reading the novel aloud together, Cézanne pointed to his chest to signify that he identified with the fictional protagonist and with his vision: 'I am Frenhofer' (quoted in Rewald, 1939: 200). Given Frenhofer's tragic end, this identification implies an acknowledgment by Cézanne that the quest for the Absolute, conventionally the hallmark of artistic genius, can bring artists to the brink of inner crisis. Cézanne also declared to a journalist: 'Surely I am a little bit crazy. Obsessed with my painting, like Frenhofer' (quoted in Rewald, 1939: 200). As a genre, the art novel often resonates with moments of aesthetic crisis in the cultural context in which it is produced: we see it in Frenhofer's obsession – filtered through Cézanne's reception – with an aesthetic ideal that can only be reached in a state of disconnect from reality.

In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Oscar Wilde presents his work as a cautionary tale against the risk of dedicating oneself to the quest for art's essence:

'All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril' (Wilde, 1890: 18). Painter Basil Hallward pays with his life for the act of laying his soul bare in Dorian Gray's portrait. As for Frenhofer, his fate varies between the different versions of Balzac's novella: in the earliest, the incommunicability of his artistic endeavour leaves him, if not mad, at least dumbfounded, in a state of complete isolation; however, after the first, substantial revisions of 1837, the final *tableau* is of Frenhofer's body found in his studio among the remains of his destroyed artworks.

The theme of alienation in the pursuit of an artistic Absolute is a recurring trope in art novels, and the third text addressed in the present study also elaborates on the idea of a crisis in art: the main narrative of Lenz's 1968 novel *Deutschstunde* (*The German Lesson*), set during and immediately after the Second World War, revolves around modernist painter Max Ludwig Nansen's stubborn resolution to continue making art after the Nazis have condemned his work as 'degenerate' and have banned him from painting. Nansen feels he has no choice but to take the risk of developing a vision that will go beneath reality's surface, since, as he puts it: 'a painter [isn't] just a man who [dabs] paint on canvas, one [is] a painter always or not at all' (Lenz, 1972 [1968]: 376).

The three literary texts discussed in this article present us with a paradox: they have inspired a wealth of aesthetic comments and analyses, both in literary and in art historical studies, even though they make it impossible for the reader to form a clear mental image of the artworks they contain. Through the mediating eye of two characters based on the historical figures of painters Frans Porbus and Nicolas Poussin, the reader of *The Unknown Masterpiece* discovers that Frenhofer's most cherished painting, a portrait of a woman titled *La Belle Noiseuse*, is an undecipherable chaos of colours, and it is Porbus's and Poussin's dismay that triggers the old master's final breakdown. The portrait at the centre of Wilde's novel constantly resists representation, in the absence of a description of its present state at any given point of the story. Nansen's most striking way of defying the ban in *The German Lesson* is to paint what he calls 'invisible pictures', making a show of setting up his painting material in front of the Baltic landscape and of giving a title,

at the end of a day of work, to the blank pages and canvasses brought back from his excursions. These art novels are deprived of a central feature of the genre: the '*verbal representation of visual representation*' (Heffernan, 2008: 3, Heffernan's emphasis), as James Heffernan defines the literary figure of the ekphrasis. Instead, they all thematise the way in which they foreclose viewing.

Presented with the task of reading the invisible or the unseeable, we can approach the 're-vision of modes of participation and apprehension of the visual' at its most fulfilling and enlightening (Karastathi, 2015: 93), a process that occurs in ekphratic prose fiction. In this analysis, we will therefore argue that ekphrases of invisible artworks bridge the liminal space between 'surface' and 'symbol' – to use Wilde's terms. They do so by pointing to dichotomies of absence and presence, and revelation and concealment, and by challenging our expectations regarding what can or cannot be expressed through images and through words. They act on the fictional canvasses on the page, but also beyond the text, where they refract through our perception of past and contemporary artistic production. In the absence of a referent, whether imaginary or real, the mental process triggered by these ekphrases becomes the verbal representation of an impossible visual representation, and trains the eye to envisage the possibility of the verbal representation, or at least the formulation of visual *abstraction*, in future encounters with forms of art disconnected from the real.

To better understand this inherent tension, the inner workings of the descriptions of invisible paintings will be approached as one would a palimpsest, since both involve a process 'of layering – of erasure and superimposition' (Dillon, 2014: 52). The metaphor of the palimpsest (a piece of parchment bearing the traces of its previous uses), popularised by Gérard Genette (1997) to describe the juxtaposition of layers of textual meaning, also applies to the images 'told', that is, inserted, into a narrative (Hoek and Meerhoff, 1995: 72). Fiction written about visual arts and about artists is particularly apt at creating the moments of 'interdisciplinary encounters' embodied in palimpsests (see Dillon, 2014: 2). The juncture here is between literary studies and the analysis of ekphratic texts on the one hand, and art history and writing about art on the other hand: turning to fiction and to the layers of meanings conveyed in imaginary works of art can foster a deeper understanding of the intersubjectivity of

writing about art, and of the way in which the description of a work of art contains not only the original gesture of the artist, but also the critic's or art historian's own point of view, projected onto the reader's imagination. As Karastathi (2015) notes:

The interpretation of ekphrasis in the novel and narrative fiction in general is marked by a turn to the conditions of viewing and the subject as perceiver; its presence in the context of a longer narrative emphasises the temporality and situated-ness of every art-encounter, as well as highlights the affective and social dimension of looking at art (Karastathi, 2015: 109).

As these examples will show, when the visual arts referred to in the text exist at the boundaries of perception, a greater involvement is required from the reader. The observation of this moment of heightened attention through the process of reading can motivate a general reflection on the aesthetics of reception, which is closely intertwined with a process of invention from the part of the observer.

Even a blank canvas can end up covered with a surplus of meaning that leaks from the realm of fiction into that of collective memory. Although other references (to Max Beckmann or Ernst Ludwig Kirchner) are identifiable, the canonical interpretation of *The German Lesson* is that Lenz's main character was inspired by painter Emil Nolde (born Emil Hansen in 1867), who grew up in northern Germany and whose style is similar to Nansen's, as described in the book (see Peinert, 1973: 150 for one of the first attempts to list parallels). This held true to such an extent that when Nolde's own political inclinations were made clear to the general public in the context of an exhibition in Frankfurt/Frankfurt am Main in 2014 (Nolde was sympathetic to national-socialist ideology), the newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published an article with the title 'We learned something wrong' ('Wir haben das Falsche gelernt'), claiming that Lenz's novel had 'painted over' (*überpinselt*) the portrait of Nansen/Nolde (Hieber, 2014).

The responsibility for this 'wrong' layer of interpretation cannot be solely laid at the door of the author, however. The use of 'we' suggests a collective reading of the novel that relied on a reductive version of the palimpsest analogy as the revelation

of a predetermined, hidden meaning, expressed in Genette's definition: 'one text can become superimposed upon another, which it does not conceal but allows to show through' (Genette, 1997: 398–399). The aim of this article is to interrogate the persuasive power that fictions on the theme of the visual arts have on cultural narratives in spite of their ambiguity, or even in spite of the warnings illustrated by the apparent failure of their main characters to share their artistic vision with the world. The following palimpsestuous reading of three *Künstlerromane* will show how they sometimes present to the reader and, beyond them, to the spectator of art, an ever more canonised image of the artist: the protagonist is set apart from the rest of the world in his capacity to embody 'genius', in his special status of 'seer'. In this respect, the possibility of reading the art 'wrong' exists all the more when the actual artworks produced display nothing but a surface on which the reader will project the artist's overpowering vision. Is it possible, then, to read these invisible artworks *right*? We will consider the hypothesis that, because the texts presented here do not hide the process by which they consolidate the norm of 'the artist', they can prepare the reader to be alert to a different kind of ekphrasis and to see and experience art anew, beyond invisible yet potent layers of symbolic meaning.

### **The Supernatural Vision of the Artist**

The visual arts in novels are assigned a spectrum of roles, all linked to the main action of 'provoking the referential illusion' (Louvel, 1998: 166). At the same time, the different ways in which art has been made the subject of fiction 'reveal much of what is essential to the period's, genre's, or writer's overall aesthetics and also their connection to conceived realities both philosophical and historical' (Steiner, 1982: 18). Many of the texts forming Balzac's *Comédie humaine* (1830–1856), in which 'it is sometimes difficult to tell fiction from reality' (Pitt-Rivers, 1993: 73), are both reflection of and catalyst for truths about the essence of art. Balzac contrasted Porbus and Poussin, whose artistic aspirations and achievements situate the story in the 17<sup>th</sup> century artworld, with Frenhofer, the invented old master whose ideal eventually remains out of reach (an idea expressed in the title of Belting's 2003 essay *The Invisible Masterpiece*). Generations of readers of *The Unknown Masterpiece*

have taken this to mean that Balzac was looking back at the legacy of previous art movements, and looking forward at the ways his epoch could propel this legacy into the modern era.

It has often been said that Frenhofer's cry, 'It's not the mission of art to copy nature, but to express it!' (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 13), was Balzac's definition of the Absolute in art, and that it prefigured the evolution of painting towards abstraction in the 20<sup>th</sup> century because, instead of reaching the true nature of things by reproducing life, Frenhofer was set on creating life itself. The 19<sup>th</sup> century version of this ideal was not abstraction, however, but absolute realism. Balzac had exposed his friend, the photographer Nadar, to his conception of the fragmented, layered materiality of the living body: 'each body in nature is composed of a series of spectres, in infinitely superimposed layers' (quoted in Nadar, 2015 [1901]: 4). Frenhofer stands for the wish to move away from a strict interpretation of *mimesis* and to make visible these spectral layers. It is on those grounds, for instance, that he criticises the shortcomings in Porbus's portrait of *Marie égyptienne*:

That's it – and that's not it. What's lacking? A trifle that's nothing at all, yet a nothing that's everything. You've got the appearance of life, but you don't express its overflowing abundance, that *je ne sais quoi* which might even be the soul, floating like a cloud over the envelope of flesh (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 15–16).

However, just as the adverb 'infinitely' cancels the possibility of encompassing what makes the body alive in Balzac's statement to Nadar, the ekphrasis of Porbus's painting hinges upon an elusive, indescribable and unquantifiable missing component, the artwork's soul, that can only be written about in the negative.

Writing about the unseeable soul follows the aesthetic belief that artworks have an inner life of their own, and that artists – and only they, it seems – have a special predisposition to act as intermediaries between our world and mysterious, otherworldly powers. The unapproachability of life's 'infinitely superimposed layers' and the inevitable blurring of the senses that occurs when one tries to reach the



essence of art are conveyed through literary tropes of the fantastic. In *The Unknown Masterpiece*, seeing how Frenhofer touches over his painting, Porbus whispers: “Now he’s in conversation with his *genius*” (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 24). Not only is the old master channelling the invisible influx that will make the artwork come to life, but he also undergoes a metamorphosis himself: ‘So rapid were his tiny movements, so impatient and abrupt, that to young Poussin there seemed to be a demon at work in the strange creature’s body, a demon acting through his hands, uncannily moving them against the old man’s will’ (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 18). The force apparently taking possession of the painter’s mind and body transforms the creator into a ‘strange creature’, or, as Poussin perceives it later in the scene, ‘a kind of fantastic genie inhabiting an unknown sphere, rousing a thousand vague ideas in his soul’ (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 24–25). What distinguishes Frenhofer from the other two artists and makes him a potential source of inspiration for future readers is the aura of uncanny that colours both his physical appearance and his way of making art, going beyond the mastery of technical skills, and becoming a spiritual experience.

One effect of borrowing from the genre of the fantastic is that the reader is made ready to embrace the possibility that art takes place at a deeper level and cannot be talked of the way one would of other objects. In *Dorian Gray*, instead of ekphrases of the central portrait, the only information available to the reader is allusions to its past states. The descriptions of Hallward’s work are always ‘out of frame’ (Prince, 2003: 396), as in the following examples: ‘He wondered, and hoped that some day he would see the change taking place before his very eyes’; ‘The sodden eyes had kept something of the loveliness of their blue, the noble curves had not yet completely passed away’ (Wilde, 1890: 74, 108). The received differentiation between literature as the art of time, and painting as the art of space, finds itself challenged (Louvel, 2000: 32) by the instability of the written image and the mutability of what should be an inanimate object. In contrast with the scarcity and unreliability of detail, which prevent the reader from picturing the figure in the portrait in her or his mind, the description of the cloth used to wrap the picture is vivid and precise: ‘a large purple satin coverlet heavily embroidered with gold’ (Wilde, 1890: 83). Faculties of perception are channelled towards the act of concealing, and the ‘absence of

representation' creates an ambiguity between 'the representation of the absence' and the accrued awareness of an 'impossibility to represent' (Louvel, 2000: 51).

For all its historical accuracy and realistic rendition of a *Zeitgeist*, *The German Lesson* also contains moments that verge on the fantastic and emphasise the artist's singularity. The first mention of Nansen finds him talking to an imaginary man named Balthasar, 'his Balthasar, whom only he could see and hear, with whom he chatted and argued and whom he sometimes jabbed with his elbow' (Lenz, 1972 [1968]: 26). The painter's behaviour creates an illusion of materiality and of life: 'The longer we stood there behind him', says the narrator, 'the more we began to believe in the existence of that Balthasar who made himself perceptible by a sharp intake of breath or a hiss of disappointment' (Lenz, 1972 [1968]: 26–7), even if an element of ambiguity is maintained by the phrases 'his Balthasar', 'that Balthasar' and, later in the novel, 'that invisible know-all, the painter's friend Balthasar' (Lenz, 1972 [1968]: 170). A recurring figure who is represented in Nansen's paintings before the Nazis came to power and after the ban was lifted, Balthasar comes out of his world of paint to voice the artist's perspective on art, particularly after the war: "Balthasar thinks we have to start learning to see again, right from scratch. Seeing – my God, as if everything didn't always depend on that!" (Lenz, 1972 [1968], 335).

When Nansen announces his intention to continue painting in spite of the ban, he claims that his invisible images will be accessible only to those ready and worthy of receiving them: 'There'll be so much light in them, you fellows won't see (*erkennen*) a thing' (Lenz, 1972 [1968]: 74). In the original text, the German verb *erkennen* (to know, to recognise) points to a higher level of knowledge as well as to the idea of already knowing, and of recognition. The attentive reader and the genius artist have in common the ability to reach beneath the surface of things, where art exists in its fullness, as envisaged by Rainer Maria Rilke in his 1903 monograph *Worpswede*: just as the landscape of North Germany bears inside it the images that a future great painter will produce, in order to do the scene justice, a writer composing a text about this same landscape will have to be 'able to see colours and say colours' (Rilke, 1996 [1903]: 400). She or he 'would have to possess the language of a poet and the spiritual presence of the orator ..., could reproduce Mona Lisa's smile with words just

as well as the ageing expression of Charles V by Titian' (Rilke, 1996 [1903]: 307). Such a gifted writer will have the talent to hint at 'the artistic events that accomplish themselves far below the surface of momentary life, in an almost timeless depth' (Rilke, 1996 [1903]: 334).

### **The Painter as Poet: Writing as a New Way of Seeing**

Beyond the opposition inherent to the differences between painting and writing as media, Virginia Woolf acknowledges that 'painting and writing have much to tell each other' (Woolf, 1966 [1925]: 241). The common denominator in this dialogue between the arts is that, like the artist, 'the novelist, after all, wants to make us see'. The ekphrasis of invisible artworks hints both at the failings of language to make the world visible and at its superior power of evocation of that invisible yet essential part of the world. In art novels, artists not only entertain a privileged relation with this essence, they are given a voice to tell the others *about* what they see. The title of Balzac's story (translated as *The Unknown Masterpiece* or, less frequently, *The Hidden Masterpiece*) expresses several possible modes of encounter with Frenhofer's last painting, listed here by A. S. Byatt:

We cannot see the paint to decide whether it is a masterpiece or a failure.  
... It is not clear whether the word refers to the historical loss of the work, the contemporary failure to recognise a masterpiece, or simply the disappearance of the recognisable forms of the subject of the portrait in the dense surface of the paint (Byatt, 2002: 27–28).

Aspects of Frenhofer's behaviour towards his peers would also suggest that it is the artist's wish that his work initially remains unknown to strangers' eyes. No longer a painting representing a woman, it has been granted another level of existence: "Expose my creation, my wife? ... She has a soul, I tell you, the soul I've endowed her with." (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 33). He even acknowledges that the artwork might be invisible to all but he, its maker: "My painting's not a painting, my figure's a feeling, a passion!" (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 34). By this definition, Dorian Gray's portrait would also qualify as an 'unknown masterpiece', an intimate, solipsistic vision of the artist's

soul that Hallward wants to keep for himself: “I really can’t exhibit it. I have put too much of myself into it” (Wilde, 1890: 19), an idea he expands upon further in a conversation with Lord Henry, but only reluctantly:

Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter, who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown it the secret of my own soul (Wilde, 1890: 20).

Putting into words the intentional concealment of the image actually increases its significance as an unattainable symbol. Hallward’s characterisation of the painting transforms it into a mirror, a surface that captures the painter’s reflection, calling back to the preface, where Wilde writes: ‘It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors’ (Wilde, 1890: 3).

The artwork can only be animated through an interaction, in which the spectator must be willing to project him- or herself. Because ‘they expected a different painting, one extrapolated, as it were, within the chain of forms’ (Serres, 1995: 21), Poussin and Porbus are at a loss when they are finally shown *La Belle Noiseuse*, after Poussin’s mistress Gillette posed for Frenhofer: “Do you see anything?” Poussin whispered to Porbus. “No, Do you?” “Nothing” (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 40). Their first impulse is to ‘see whether the light, falling directly on the canvas he was showing them, had neutralized its every effect’ (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 40), in the same way one would search for the right angle to avoid glare in a mirror. It becomes apparent that they are facing ‘colours daubed one on top of the other and contained by a mass of strange lines forming a wall of paint’ (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 40). The invisible does not emerge from an absence of content, but from the juxtaposition of tones and paint towards infinity, from an excess of life: that of the idealised woman, but also of the artist himself.

The brutal way the old master is taken out of a state of trance that allows him a unique faculty of artistic vision (see Damisch, 1985) exposes the incommunicability of this vision: “Nothing on my canvas?” echoed Frenhofer, looking back and forth

between the two painters and his imagined picture' (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 42). Balzac situates the discovery of the painting's 'imagined' nature in the liminal space that Frenhofer's gaze travels to, from spectators other than himself, to his creation. The circulation of the gaze, for the reader as for the protagonist, is akin to the revelation of the co-existence of several layers on the canvas, and of the possibility of the painting being both a failure and a masterpiece.

While demonstrating that essential artistic meaning cannot be achieved in the picture itself, Balzac simultaneously creates the possibility of coming to a deeper understanding of this essence, which can be achieved by using words. By drawing constant parallels between painters and poets and giving Frenhofer an eloquent, enthusiastic voice to talk about his art, he links 'the qualities that great painting must express – movement, spirit, soul, thought, causality – ... to the properties of verbal expression' (Berg, 2007: 72). Even if the ideal image that Frenhofer had in mind cannot be seen, to read and, from the point of view of the other protagonists, to hear about it, brings its essence closer to the observer's perception, and the ekphrasis still fulfils its purpose without a referent, verifying Heffernan's statement that:

Ekphrasis never aims simply to reproduce a work of visual art in words, so there is no point in judging ekphratic poetry by a criterion of fidelity to the work it represents. We can much better judge it by asking what it enables us to see in the work of art, or even just to see, period (Heffernan, 2008: 157).

Witnessing how Frenhofer paints over Porbus's work to infuse it with life, Poussin experiences the episode as a 'sudden transfiguration' in which the master becomes 'Art itself, art with all its secrets, its passions, its reveries' (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 25). The disappointing shock of looking at *La Belle Noiseuse* for the first time is made stronger by the contrast with Poussin's awe for Frenhofer, whom he had elevated to an embodiment of Art, but also by the contrast with the old master's eloquence in putting his vision into words:

Look at the light on the breast and you'll see how, by a series of brushstrokes and by accents applied with a full brush, I've managed to capture the truth

of light, and to combine it with the gleaming whiteness of the highlights, and how, by an opposite effort, by smoothing the ridges and the texture of the paint itself, by caressing my figure's contours and by submerging them in halftones, I have eliminated the very notion of drawing, of artificial means, and given my work the look and the actual solidity of nature. Come closer, you'll see better how it's done. At a distance, it vanishes. You see? Here, right here, I believe it's truly remarkable (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 41–42).

Frenhofer guides the other painters' gaze and their positioning in front of the painting, while simultaneously deconstructing his artistic gesture: the series of verbs of actions brings order to what Porbus and Poussin perceive as a chaotic wall of paint, because they only see the surface, whereas Frenhofer reaches for the deeper quality of life through the 'opposite effort' of doing and undoing, of going to and fro between imagined layers.

His rhetorical skills recall an important connection between *pictura* and *poesis* made early in the text, immediately after his statement of art's greater mission: "Remember, artists aren't mere imitators, they're poets!" (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 13). Visual artists and poets are engaged in the pursuit of the same Absolute. Even though, as a painter, Frenhofer's quest is doomed by the conventions of *mimesis* – in the absence of an original, the portrait cannot be assessed by the others as a copy, whether faithful or not (see Larsson, 2015: 4) – as a poet, he captivates his audience and makes them eager to share in his vision, leading Poussin to state that the old master is 'even more of a poet than a painter' (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 42). While, in light of the story's denouement, this sentence is ambivalent and eventually negative from the point of view of Frenhofer's fellow artists, it also leaves open the possibility of an aesthetic appreciation of the virtuality of his work: 'While perhaps we do not see the same thing as the old painter, we do see something in the same way as he does; we imagine it. We see by reading through and behind the broken lines of a canvas on which nothing actually appears' (Bongiorni, 2000: 97).

It is through his words that the reading of the art of Frenhofer as being ahead of its time is made possible, a reading pioneered in a not insignificant part by Cézanne.

Recognising himself in a character that he so admired, the painter projected his own aspirations on to a story that encouraged him in his pursuit of an artistic ideal, but also, according to Joachim Gasquet's biography of Cézanne, felt the same sense of isolation from his contemporaries:

Like the young Nicolas Poussin in the story, faced with the layers of colours with which the older painter has covered all parts of his figure in his effort to perfect it, most people looking at Cézanne's canvasses during this sad period of his life which we have reached, looking at his first masterpieces, in all sincerity saw nothing but a chaos of colours, a sort of shapeless fog (Gasquet, 1991 [1926]: 91).

Although the chaos of colours on Frenhofer's painting would have been interpreted negatively by Balzac's contemporaries (see Brix, 2003: 241–52), Frenhofer's speeches on aesthetics touched upon a core component of modernist artistic sensibility, particularly with regards to the perception of forms: 'Nature consists of a series of shapes that melt into one another. Strictly speaking, there's no such thing as drawing! ... Line is the means by which man accounts for the effect of light on objects, but in nature there are no lines – in nature everything is continuous and whole' (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 23). This echoes Cézanne's revolutionary approach: 'Pure drawing is abstraction. The drawing and the colour are not distinct, everything in nature being coloured' (quoted in Ashton, 1991: 36). The closeness of these two statements confirms Jon Kear's interpretation that 'the influence of *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* on Cézanne extended beyond the construction of the artist's persona and had a more profound impact on his painting – that he regarded the story as in some way instructive' (Kear, 2006: 346). It is because *La Belle Noiseuse* is unfinished and does not live up to Frenhofer's masterful description of it that the modern artist is at liberty to push his art further: 'Cézanne could lay claim to everything that Balzac puts into the mouth of his old master' (Gasquet, 1991 [1926]: 90). Even if his own views never reached this far, Balzac fostered in his readers the type of imagination required to embrace Cézanne's project of art as expression rather than representation. Pablo

Picasso, who worked on illustrations for *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* between 1924 and 1931, took Frenhofer's tale to mean that 'there are so many realities that when you try to make them all visible, you end up in the dark. Which is why when you make a portrait, you have to stop at some sort of caricature. Otherwise, in the end, there is nothing left' (Picasso, 1998: 96).

Going back to Wilde's opening warning, the peril he describes seems to lie more precisely in any attempt to *communicate* what one sees beneath the surface and reads in the symbol, because it makes one vulnerable to the alteration or annihilation of one's vision, overpowered by others. A modernist artist like Nansen is acutely aware of this risk, and incurs a ban because he refuses to represent reality as defined by his contemporaries. His canvasses are not so much blank as they are showing an image of modernity pre-emptively destroyed for not complying with the regime's vision. Nansen crushes the mirror that he is expected to hold towards society, and expresses, through an imaginary debate with Balthasar, the artist's complete isolation from the world:

Seein's a sort of mutual swapping. What that produces is mutual transformation. ... Another thing that seeing means is coming closer, diminishing the distance between. What else? Balthasar thinks all that's not enough. He insists that seeing is also exposure. Something gets laid bare in such a way that nobody in the whole world can pretend he doesn't understand. ... I have something against this strip-tease act. You can strip all the skins off an onion until nothing is left. I tell you: one begins to see where one stops playing the beholder and simply invents what one needs (Lenz, 1972 [1968]: 336).

When Nansen became 'the personification of an ideal, the heroic resistance towards an oppressive government, of an artist whose highest duty lies in the continuation of art' (Kontje, 1980: 462), and his invisible canvasses were read as palimpsests both concealing and revealing his act of inner resistance, it was in fact Balthasar's view that was taken into account, not Nansen's. The 'exposure' of 'something laid



bare' for the whole world to see was exactly what the post-war generation needed in order to come to terms with a troubled past, through the redemptive power of art produced in a time of turmoil. The figure of Jens Jepsen, the policeman who executed orders and confiscated Nansen's work, was interpreted as being representative of 'those Germans who, before and during the War, blindly accepted a false and perverted vision of reality in lieu of one that might have emerged had there been, at both the individual and collective levels, the determination to "see"' (Gohlman, 1979: 82).

The blurred line between Nansen and his alleged real-life inspiration, Emil Nolde, results from the bringing together of 'the fictional and the referential' (Brogniez, 2011: 93). It feeds on a conventional notion of art history as 'history of artistic behaviour' and calls back to Vasari's original artwriting as *'microbiography'*, focusing on the gestures that an artist 'achieved within his œuvre' (Bourriaud, 2010: 108). In *The German Lesson*, Nansen's biography is contained in a framing narrative, from the point of view of a younger character, the policeman's son. Juvenile delinquent Siggj Jepsen hands in an empty notebook in response to an assignment given by the school facility in which he is interned. He is then put in isolation until he fulfils the assignment, an essay on 'The Joy of Duty'. He chooses to contrast the story of his father, who sees his duty in the task of confiscating any artwork produced in defiance of the ban, with the rebellious Nansen, as a parable of blind obedience to an unjust order set against the artist's courageous resistance to oppression.

In a scene where Nansen is summoned by Jepsen to reveal the contents of his briefcase for inspection, the painter acts with defiance, as if the sheets of paper he was revealing were not actually completely blank: "Just take a close look, with that expert eye of yours. With your eye that sees into the future"; "Let me know when you've detected something. When the paper shows its true colours under your scrutiny" (Lenz, 1972 [1968]: 140 and 141). The moment of revelation and of vision is projected into the future, where the act of seeing will uncover the artwork's true meaning. Unlike a secondary character named Hinnerk Timmsen, who attends the search and confesses that he sees nothing – "As far as I'm concerned, this is paper"; ... (to the painter) "You've got to admit you haven't yet immortalized yourself on those

sheets. They're as innocent as fresh-fallen snow" (140) – the protagonists stubbornly acknowledge the reality of the invisible and its materiality, both for different reasons.

The pictures, though invisible, nonetheless re-present, in the sense analysed by Jacques Derrida of 'present in the place of' as a 'replacement', but also consequently as a 'supplement' (see Derrida, 1978). The discussion, therefore, can still be read as an ekphrasis, a substitution of words (Heffernan's 'verbal representation') for images existing as potential: for the painter, they symbolise the artmaking process, the time spent, as he explains, 'working on a sunset'; however, for the policeman, it is a provocation against authority, calling for immediate official action: "These sheets are going to be examined" (Lenz, 1972 [1968]: 140). All possibilities coexist on the blank canvas and in the words that describe it as blank, 'in an open, ceaselessly renewable circuit where readability and visibility are embedded and intertwined' (Arambasin, 2007: 66), and the process of identification with one version of reality or with another is left undecided and ongoing. The narrator Siggi, when asked to take sides and tell everyone what he sees, merely shrugs and says: "I don't know. Not yet" (Lenz, 1972 [1968]: 139).

Writing retrospectively about Nansen's 'invisible' art could substitute itself for the act of representation that the painter has been forbidden to accomplish. However, Siggi is also confronted with the impossibility of employing the usual mode of ekphrasis as 'a kind of writing that turns pictures into storytelling words' (Heffernan, 2015: 48) when he recomposes, in his assignment, the moment when he browsed through the confiscated folder of pictures with his policeman father:

But how am I to describe those invisible paintings? Those paintings of which Max Ludwig Nansen once said that they contained all he had to say about this age in which we lived, a sort of confession including everything he had experienced in the course of his life. What had he got out of it all and how had he expressed it all once he had ceased to paint? In what light did his sorrows become visible now? And how is one to give an account of them, indeed what is the way to see and contemplate those invisible pictures of his? (Lenz, 1972 [1968]: 262)

This series of interrogations evokes the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* ('coming to terms with the past') in Germany's cultural memory of the Nazi era and of the Second World War. The narrator's only resource to describe these paintings is his first-hand witnessing of Nansen's stance against authority, and what the painter told him about his work; on the other hand, the paintings themselves show and tell nothing, or barely nothing. The series that Nansen calls 'invisible pictures' turns out to be almost blank canvasses, showing fragments of shapes and figures. The process of representation, since it is bound to fail, is deliberately limited to allusions and approximations, both of the images, and in the vocabulary and syntax of the description by Sigg: 'only what was most essential was there to be recognized – or so one was told – for all I cared, perhaps a seventh of it all; the rest – and one could see without difficulty that the rest was a very considerable amount – remained invisible' (Lenz, 1972 [1968]: 262). The ambiguity over the status of what the narrator and his father see ('or so one was told') is maintained throughout the description, placing the artworks in a space between representation and abstraction. Sigg refuses the imposition of any alternative interpretation upon the art: 'I could see only what there was to be seen, and I had no intention of seeing anything else' (Lenz, 1972 [1968]: 262).

This uncertainty runs throughout the novel, yet it does not prevent Sigg, and the novel's contemporary readers in his wake, to elevate the canvasses to the symbolic status of carriers of both a moral and an artistic truth. 'Palimpsests are of such interest to subsequent generations because although the first writing on the vellum seemed to have been eradicated after treatment, it was often imperfectly erased' (Dillon, 2014: 12). Many examples of so-called 'degenerate art', created by modernist artists, were saved from destruction ordered by the national-socialist regime and, similarly, individual acts of resistance were saved from oblivion by fiction, to the point of producing a false association between one act and the other.

### **Looking and Reading into Art**

When the object of the representation cannot be perceived through the eyes of the characters in the book, the assumption is that it cannot be, strictly speaking, imagined by the reader either. Invisible paintings by Frenhofer, Hallward and Nansen

have been shown to challenge this view and to offer a productive resolution to the paradox of their unreal existence: 'Difference produces what it forbids, makes possible the very thing that it makes impossible' (Derrida, 1976: 143). The evocation of invisible pictures in literary form, urging an active participation from the reader, finds a famous historical antecedent in the blank page in chapter 38 of *Tristram Shandy*, where the reader is invited to draw the portrait of the Widow Wadman: 'To conceive this right, – call for pen and ink – here's paper ready to your hand. – Sit down, Sir, paint her to your own mind ..., please but your own fancy in it' (Sterne, 1991 [1759–67]: 344–5). Using images when words fail to describe the unsayable conjures up a picture in the making (Louvel, 1998: 101), in the literal sense of the word 'imagination'. The recipient of the discourse is part of a common attempt to 'fabricate the illusory' (Chazal and Mathieu-Castellani, 1994: 12) and to infuse the text with her or his own meaning.

When the imagined object described in the text is invisible or visible only partially as 'incoherent mist' (Balzac, 2001 [1831]: 40–1), in a way that forbids mental representation, all the mind can register is a contradiction between the written and the visual, which makes the reader more attuned to the fact that a work of art in words 'signifies not reality, but the process of perceiving and conceiving of it' (Steiner, 1982: 181). The transition of artworks through the medium of literature, in which images, because they are put into words, are also thoughts, evokes one of the aphorisms in Wilde's preface: 'Thought and language are the artist's instruments of an art' (Wilde, 1890: 17). This applies to writers and visual artists alike: in an essay on Rembrandt, Proust refers to museums as 'houses that only shelter thoughts', where the visitor knows 'that what he sees in those paintings hanging next to each other are thoughts, that those paintings are beautiful, but the canvas, the paint that has dried on it and the gilded wood that frames it aren't' (Proust, 1994 [1954]: 659). Aesthetic appreciation of these paintings occurs not merely when looking at them, but in the moment when the spectator reads into the material layers (paint, canvas, frame) and reaches the layer of thoughts.

These thoughts will vary from spectator to spectator. In Wilde's novel, Hallward admits to the existence of a chasm between his artistic intent and the meaning that

can be read into the objects that he produces: 'Even now I cannot help feeling that it is a mistake to think that passion one feels in creation is ever really shown in the work one creates. Art is always more abstract than we fancy. Form and colour tell us of form and colour – that is all' (Wilde, 1890: 81). This 'all' is both a limitation and an opening to the Absolute that modern and postmodern artists, particularly those working with abstraction, have sought after, wanting 'to produce something entirely outside the traces of order, something in the end invisible because it is nothing and it possesses and comprises nothing' (Elkins, 2010: 237).

In his 1929 travelogue *San Gimignano*, Walter Benjamin commented on how difficult it is 'to find words for what is before one's eyes', not because the words are hard to find, but because 'they strike with small hammers on the Real (*das Wirkliche*) until they have pulled out of it the image, as if out of a copper plate' (Benjamin, 1980 [1929]: 366). There is tension in the act of translating an artwork into language; it brings the text to the boundaries of its own representability, which in return asks the question of representability in the visual arts. Art both engages with and transcends the real world through the mediation of the spectator who sees it and, at the same time, realises what she or he does *not* see.

Art novels that isolate the mind from traditional channels of perception pave the way for alternative discourses on art, where, as when reading fiction, multiple interpretations are allowed to coexist. In its English translation, the title of art historian Daniel Arasse's collection of texts on paintings invites the reader to *Take a closer look* (Arasse, 2013). The book actually revolves around the unexpected, provocative statement of its original French title: *On n'y voit rien* ('We can't see a thing'). In the commentary on an *Annunciation* by Francesco del Cossa, this apparently defeatist admission reveals its positive and productive side:

it [the detail of a snail towards the edge of the image] appeals to you to see differently and makes you understand that you are seeing nothing in what you are looking at. Or rather, in what you see, you fail to see what you are looking at, what you are looking for, what you are expecting to find, namely, the emergence of the invisible into the field of vision (Arasse, 2013: 37).

As in the fictional texts analysed in this article, a distinction is made between reaching for the obviously visible and keeping an open mind about what a painting has to offer beneath the surface. More so than a closer look, the art historian invites the reader to take a fresh look.

In an attempt to renew scholarly habits, Arasse departs from the genre of the essay and uses fictional encounters (a letter, a conversation, a dialogue in a short story...) in which the meaning is liberated from the constraints of traditional art historical analysis. He is concerned, as he puts it in another of the book's texts – a letter addressed to an academic named Giulia – that 'you sometimes look at painting in such a way that you don't see what painter and painting are showing you', because of:

a sort of screen (made up of texts, quotations, and outside references) that you sometimes seem to want – at all costs – to put up between you and the work, a sort of sun filter to shield you from the work and safeguard the acquired habits on which our academic community agrees and in which it recognizes itself (Arasse, 2013: 3).

Here, layers of received interpretations have become an obstacle that blocks the view, or a lens that distorts any immediate artistic experience.

This reflects the dilemma facing the interpreters of visual arts when trying to determine a meaningful image: 'the desire for a speaking picture is the desire to destroy the barrier between art, which is limited in its mode of signification, and human beings, whose speech and physical presence combine *semiosis* appealing to all the senses' (Steiner, 1982: 3). Sigg's obsession with preserving Nansen's vision through writing about the symbolic meaning of artworks he doesn't see can be better understood using Georges Didi-Huberman's analysis of the image as imbued with an aura, with a latent, invisible core that is looking back at the subject. Seeing is not a way of gaining (for instance, knowledge) or having (in one's possession), it is a mode of being: 'when seeing is feeling that something inevitably escapes us, in other words, when seeing is losing. Here we have it all' (Didi-Huberman, 1992: 14).

Thus, in the *German Lesson*, 'seeing' art is not a matter of representation but of being in the material presence of the artworks: when Siggi and Teo Busbeck, who has been charged by Nansen with the task of finding a place to hide his latest work after the painter was arrested, discuss the invisible paintings, Busbeck claims: 'You don't get anything out of it, do you?' However, Siggi challenges this assumption:

'But you can hold them in your hands?'

'Certainly one can hold them in one's hands.'

'One can carry them?'

'Yes, one can.'

'And hang them up on the wall?'

'Yes, one can hang them up.'

'But if one can do all that, why do you call them invisible?' (Lenz, 1972 [1968]: 247)

According to Cunningham, 'writing is always tormented by the question of real presence' (Cunningham, 2007: 61). The question is asked in Siggi's essay on 'The Joy of Duty', in the novel where it is enclosed, and in the aesthetic discussions provoked by Lenz's fiction. What you *can* get out of Nansen's invisible works, through the very admission that the impossibility of describing them is the only thing missing from their ekphrasis, is their 'absolute *thereness*' as 'aesthetic object[s]' (Cunningham, 2007: 61). By taking apart all the characteristics expected in an artwork, the narrator reaches towards the essential quality of art: detached from all functions of representation, it exists because the observer and, by extension, the reader, have forged a relationship with the artwork and formed their own mental idea of it, which does not need to be an image.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the layers of meaning that are created through words when they serve to depict invisible and unseeable works of art feeds into a double discussion of aesthetic and literary boundaries, and the ways in which these are furthered by artists and authors. *The Unknown Masterpiece* takes the reader 'where the paradigms are exposed, where painting is at work' (Didi-Huberman, 2012: 12), and *The Picture*

of *Dorian Gray* translates an aesthetic ideal into language, 'perpetually reaching towards an inaccessible elsewhere' (Louvel, 2000: 50). These unseeable artworks, despite not being representable in the traditional sense, provoke a similar effect in the spectator to that elicited by monochrome paintings. As Elkins notes, 'They can make us think of not seeing, of having nothing before us to see: and that thought, perhaps, is the most radical available negation of order possible in visual art' (Elkins, 2010: 237). Describing the 'negative' presentation of the invisible in literature brings us closer to what Elkins postulates to be the essence of pictures, that which remains after their semiotic function has been exposed and which therefore eludes any interpretation: pictures are 'gestures in the direction of meaninglessness, invisibility or unrepresentability, whether they aim to evade meaning or encompass it. They signify, but only under duress, and part of what any picture means is that it does not mean, or that it only seems to mean' (Elkins, 2010: 213).

Under this light we understand a crucial quotation from *The German Lesson*, 'the things that matter, that's invisible. ... Some day, I don't know when, at some other period, it will all be visible' (Lenz, 1972 [1968]: 247), to mean that, while no single layer of meaning can prevail on its own, each new piece of writing contributes to the palimpsest that is our collective understanding of the nature of art. For Siggi, for a generation of post-war readers, for people looking at the career and work of Emil Nolde, Nansen's invisible canvasses have come to mean what each moment of reception needed them to. What they could never do, was mean *nothing*. In Lenz's ekphrases without visual representation, the unrepresentability of invisible pictures and their visible presence as texts do not form a contradiction, but a palimpsestuous co-presence, following Merleau-Ponty's definition of the invisible: 'one cannot see it there and every effort to *see it there* makes it disappear, but it is *in the line* of the visible, it is its virtual focus, it is inscribed within it' (Merleau-Ponty, 2000: 215).

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