The underneaths of painting

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'THERE IS A WOMAN UNDER THERE'

'Woman for woman': Balzac's *Le Chef d’oeuvre inconnu* is first of all the tale of an exchange, an exchange to which the narrative conforms in its most evident structure, articulated as it is in two parts of unequal length, the first entitled 'Gilette', the second 'Catherine Lescault', after the names of two women whose 'circulation' — in the words of the ethnologists — provides the main-spring of the intrigue. But it is also, and indissolubly, the story of an invention made possible, precipitated by, this exchange, within which, in the final analysis, it is contained: the invention, in the archaeological sense of the word, of a masterpiece, to date unknown, an 'unheard of' masterpiece (if one can speak in these terms, as it is painting which is in question: but a painting of which, as of a dream, the reader will know nothing except what Balzac tells us), an unrevealed masterpiece which will remain so, because of the failure of its inventors to recognize it as such; inventors who, precisely through the ruse of the exchange, knew how to induce its author to reveal the canvas he kept concealed in his studio. What is more, the painter would not have lent himself to this game (this exchange) except in so far as it duplicated the very game of that painting. Woman for woman, and a woman in flesh and bones for a woman in paint. The three associates were in agreement over the terms of the contract, prepared to renounce the prey for the shadow if it was worth the candle. Hence the disarray of the inventors when confronted by a 'so-called painting' in which they initially see nothing but, 'a confused mass of colours contained by a multitude of bizarre lines, which formed as it were, "a wall of paint"'. Even greater disarray when, looking closer:

... they saw, in a corner of the canvas, the tip of a foot emerging from this chaos of colours, tones, indecisive nuances, a kind of undefined mist; but a delectable foot, a living foot. They remained petrified before this fragment escaped from a formidable, a slow, progressive, destruction. This foot appeared like the torso of a Venus of Parian marble rising amongst the ruins of a burnt city. — 'There is a woman under there', cried Pourbus, pointing out the various layers of colour with which the older painter had successively loaded every part of this figure in his wish to bring it to perfection.

It was as if art had here laboured against the grain of invention, and proceeded by means of painting to bury the *corpus delicti*, a body, the sudden and fragmentary resurgence of which will take on the force of a truth. But in order for them to arrive at this truth it will have been necessary for our two inventors not to stop *en route*. They were looking for a painting? Their inventiveness gets greater; they will end by unearthing, from the ruins of the masterpiece, the trace of a woman who bore its mark.

To summarize Balzac's story sofar. At the end of the year 1612, a young artist calls on the painter Pourbus, author of a celebrated full-length portrait [portrait en pied] of Catherine de Médicis (but the portrait reveals nothing of the queen's feet [pieds], concealed as they are under the ample ceremonial dress), who worked for the French court until 1620 (he was to die two years later), by which time Marie de Médicis favoured Rubens over him. Having hesitated for a short while on the threshold, the young man finally enters the studio following in the steps of a strange character, a richly clothed old man whose diabolical and *indefinable* air fascinates him immediately. No sooner are they admitted than the attention of the two visitors is instantly arrested by a painting representing Marie L’Egyptienne, the ‘beautiful sinner’ as she will be called later by the old man for whom Pourbus appears to show great respect. Here the first lesson in painting takes place, articulated in two distinct and complementary moments: first a lesson in theory for Pourbus, indicating a defect in his painting, that it lacks a ‘mere nothing which is everything’, ‘life’ (if one is to believe what his censor says, the painter could not make a choice between the system of drawing and that of colouring, and did not have the genius required to fuse the two rival methods); second, a practical demonstration, this one intended for the young neophyte: the old man takes up the brushes of Pourbus and starts to work on his painting, putting in here two strokes of the brush, there a single one, but always so much to the point that once the work is finished, they will be faced with a seemingly new painting. 'It is only the last stroke of the brush that counts. Pourbus put in hundreds, I add but one. No one [my emphasis] gives us any credit for what is underneath.' This inevitably puts us in mind of Proust and the elation he attributes to Balzac, 'when he, casting over his works a look, at once that of a stranger and a father, suddenly decided, projecting a retrospective light
upon them, that they would be more beautiful brought together in one cycle where the same characters would return again and again and added to his work through this conjunction, the last and the most sublime brushstroke. Again there is this remark by Proust which sounds like a variation on the theme of Le chef d’oeuvre inconnu: ‘An eventual unity which is not factitious or else it would have crumbled into dust like so many systematizations of mediocre writers who, by dint of titles and subtitles give the appearance of having followed a single and transcendent aim’.¹

A new painting – and in a sense that of another painter: ‘It is not yet as good as my “Belle-Noisuse”, but a man could put his name at the bottom of such a work. “Yes, I would sign it”, he added, rising to take a mirror in which he looked at it’. The first figure of the exchange, that of signatures, looks forward to that of names whilst the test of the mirror seems to prefigure his final operation, when the time will come for the old master to call upon the judgement of his colleagues. The mirror which is the painter’s guide and master in Alberti’s writings; but above all (as Leonardo da Vinci observes) the mirror which in inverting the image presents it as if it had been painted by another,² thus enabling ‘a gaze which is at once that of a stranger and a father’. But the reader as yet does not know the name of the master who declares himself ready to sign Pourbus’ work. In the interval between the two stages of the lesson, he has nonetheless come to know that of the neophyte, who came looking for one master and found another: called upon to prove himself, the young man has executed a sketch of the painting, and, having met with the approval of his elders, has signed it with his name: Nicolas Poussin.

The three artists move to the old man’s house. And there, Poussin (since it is he) sees two paintings on the wall. The first painting, which the stranger (who does not yet have a name, whereas the neophyte has begun making a name for himself), advises him not to inspect too closely, to avoid being driven to despair: there it is, he says, naming at the same time the painting and its author, the Adam of his master Mabuse, in which Mabuse surpassed himself, yet something is still lacking there: not life but ‘the air, the sky, the wind’. And more important still: in the place of the first and only man directly issued from the hands of God, who should have something of the divine about him, there is only a man (yet, the fact that there was a woman under there, and nothing but a woman, will reassure the inventors of a masterpiece which will thus not be quite the undefinable thing, the ‘daub’ they thought it to be at first). And what is more, as far as ‘daubs’ go, there is this other painting which the young man thinks he recognizes as a Giorgione. The master of the house corrects him, warning him as if by antiphrasis or preterition that this is one of his earliest ‘daubs’; and at that point the name emerges, as the name of Poussin did before a signature which is given in reply to the question of the paternity of the painting. Indeed, at this very moment, Pourbus addresses their host, calling him by his name, ‘Master Frenhofer’, to ask him if he will finally be allowed to see that which the painter has named his ‘Belle Noisuse’.

A request of this kind reveals an explicit preoccupation in Pourbus: he wishes to learn from Frenhofer the means of producing ‘a painting, broad, high and deep, in which the figures would be life-size’, as if the illusion of life were a matter of scale. But the old man still refuses to show his work: he has yet to complete it, he says, pray as he is to doubts, ‘as if too much knowledge, like too much ignorance, had a negative effect’. It is not, however, for lack of work or study: does he not take a pride in having analysed and lifted layer by layer the paintings of Titian, that master of colour, that god of light? Would it therefore be the case that, even though nobody compliments the painter on it, not even Titian, what is underneath does have its importance in painting, and, at least for the experts, it is not only the last brushstroke that matters? The person who looks at the matter more closely is forced to agree that in the end, the final touches take their meaning only in relation to the entire work that preceded them, which they enhance, by casting it into relief. Over/under: the speech of Frenhofer bears witness that the opposition is not as simple as it appears at first, even though the end of the story (‘there is a woman under there’) seems to reinstate it, in the final analysis as something which is relevant, if not true in however paradoxical a sense. According to Frenhofer, it is as if painting produces its fullest effect only when it proceeds, in its inmost texture, from a regulated exchange of positions; an exchange equivalent to a manner of platting with the threads moving up and down alternatively, each individual thread passing now under, now over, constantly evading the univocal sign; an exchange inherent to the texture, if not to the very principle of painting, which the precepts of the old master could well appear to revolutionize: does not Frenhofer maintain that the shadows should come in second place superimposed on a light ground of half-tints and glazes which will progressively lose their transparency; and that in drawing one should model, so that delineation proceeds from the paint-work, and not the reverse, and one cannot decide precisely where it is that drawing meets the background. To follow this program rigorously ‘one should perhaps never draw a single line, but rather start a figure from the middle, concerning oneself first with the lighter sections, and only then moving on to the darker ones’. But this reversal which upsets an entire tradition based on the priority of drawing over colour (drawing, in Alberti’s writing, that gives reason to colour), Frenhofer implicitly admits to not yet having achieved: he satisfies

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himself at this point with retrospectively enveloping the outlines in a cloud of half-tints which diffuses them, observing the lesson of life and its overflowing plenitude, "this 'je-ne-sais-quoi', the soul, that floats nebulously over its envelope". To such an extent that his eventual failure might have its technical explanation there: far from the figure offering itself as the result of the work of painting, Frenhofer will have forced it underneath by means of his conjunctions as Proust puts it, and his superimpositions, in the words of Balzac.

This speech, and the reverie into which the old man then falls, provoke in Poussin "an inexplicable artist's curiosity". The character that the author himself has complacently shrouded in the cloud of the indefinable, this character is only too well calculated to 'awaken in the soul a thousand confused thoughts', and (Balzac writes on) the effect is like that of a song which summons up the fatherland in the heart of the exile. Is this to say that a novice taking his first steps in the artistic career was less well protected against the return of an archaic memory having a secret complicity with painting, than the accepted artist he had initially chosen for his master? That there was a mystery there, Poussin states clearly: he would not have needed the prompting of his young visitor to try and get to the bottom of it. However, the curiosity that drove him to it was of a different nature to that which will then take hold of Poussin; the speech he delivers to Poussin effectively demonstrates the disparity between their stakes.

Indeed, this other speech — one of reason, of common-sense — comes after that of Frenhofer, half-way into the text, as a kind of warning or a reaction designed to avert something. Whatever the attraction of the mystery may be, it is obvious that Poussin is not inclined to surrender to his fascination, or to let himself be swept in a direction in which he does not wish to go. Frenhofer is undoubtedly passionately involved in his art; but his continual searching has led him to the point where he doubts its very purpose. Does he not go as far, in his moments of despair, as to claim that drawing does not exist? I shall simply remark here that Poussin mistakes the effect for the cause: for it is not despair that made Frenhofer speak in such terms, but rather the idea that in nature there is no line that drove him to despair. It remains true that, for an established artist like Poussin, it would be unthinkable to despair of painting or to drive painters to despair. To wish for only geometrical figures to be represented by means of lines, is as he says, to speak 'beside the truth', since in fact one has no need of colour to create a figure, but only of a line to define it, a clear outline, whilst Frenhofer's entire programme aimed by contrast at the indefinable.

One of the functions of the idea of 'truth' in painting affirms itself here; its function as boundary, as guard-rail or protection against all manner of uncontrollable drifting. The truth of painting is a function of its means, and these means are limited to the extent that they are not linked essentially to the task of delimitation, as drawing rightfully demonstrates. In pretending to transgress the boundaries of art, in wishing to go 'beside the truth' (which for Poussin, is equivalent to going 'over the line'), one will only spoil one's work. 'Drawing — Poussin will say — provides the skeleton; colouring is life; but life without the skeleton is a thing more incomplete than the skeleton without life'. An assertion that is at the basis of all vanitas pictures and at the same time characteristically leads to the privileging of drawing, as drawing is integrally linked to the armature, the framework of the painting, what is supposed to come underneath, to the detriment of its skin, its epidermis. With the proviso that it would perhaps be appropriate for drawing not to reveal anything of the bone-structure — and, as Cesare Ripa wrote in his Iconology, 'the proportions which are the foundation of the painting and are inscribed in the drawing before the painter sets his hand to colour should be masked and concealed in the completed work': that is why Ripa proposed to represent painting in the image of a woman clothed in a long robe which concealed her feet as with Poussin's Catherine de Médicis, or his Marie de Médicis which we can see now in the Louvre.

But there is another truth, the truth of the painter Poussin, rather than of Painting: the painter should only think with brush in hand, and not let himself be caught off the point. What a misfortune for him if, like Frenhofer, he had been born rich: for want of being oppressed by material necessity, he would then have the free time in which to ask questions, and lose himself in the mists of theory. But Poussin does not listen to Poussin. He has no doubts, or rather he has none anymore: he himself wants to become rich as well, and he believes that the moment has come for him to become so. He need only enter the studio of the old man and discover his secret, learning from him what 'true' painting is, something of which Poussin has no idea. What is his scheme, if indeed he has one?

If we are to believe Frenhofer, some of the doubts that assailed him came from not yet having met a woman whose contours were flawless (there are no lines in nature; however the human body, and most particularly the female body, still enforces the idea of the contour through which figure is detached from background), 'the elusive Venus of the ancients, the divine nature or ideal of which we only know scattered reflections'. But how can one hope to find this woman who could not be anyone else but the first woman (we recall the Adam of Mabuse), as she issued by way of Adam's body from the hands of the creator? The only solution is to invent her, in an archaeological and almost hellish sense: 'Like Orpheus, I
shall descend into the underworld of art to bring back life from it’. Art can aspire to life only on condition that first of all it passes by way of its opposite, that it vies with death, which of course is not without risk. And one can imagine that, like Orpheus, the artist is inclined to doubt, is tempted to turn round, to make an about-turn in order to invoke the test of reality, and to look for a perfect but living woman; not to take her as model, but to compare her to his work and verify if the painting still holds up in the presence of the woman – woman for woman – in the same way as Braque would reportedly sometimes take his paintings into the fields, to see whether they stood up to the test of reality.

The terms of the exchange are laid down, and Poussin will betake himself, without thinking – such is the machinery of desire – to his mistress’ house, she who gives her name to the first part of this tale, or rather this ‘philosophical study’, at least in its final version (I shall come back to this). Gilette soon guesses what his desire really is, so transparent is the game; and unfortunately for her – she sees right through the one whom she, at this moment, in tender mockery, and just to make fun of him (faire la niquet), calls ‘Nick’. It is the desire of a painter, not that of a lover. It will be, so Pourbus will set the terms (but this Gilette must not know) woman for woman, woman against woman. However, the exchange will not be reduced to a mere barter, grounded as it is in the triangular relation between three men embodying the three ages of life as in the celebrated painting by Titian. Three men who are the subjects of the exchange, or its actors, with the two women being its object: one who is real, endowed from the outset with a name, or at least a Christian name, but is perhaps not as naive as this name might lead one to believe; a woman in whom Frenhofer (or, at least, this is what the so-called ‘Nick’ tries to convince him and convince himself of) will only see Woman, she for whom there is no name; and the other who is a woman of paint, in paint, but defied by art, who will receive her name at the very instant when Gilette loses hers. Two women, and perhaps three: for one should not forget Pourbus’ Marie, his ‘beautiful sinner’, or indeed his Catherine (de Médicis), even though Balzac does not take account of it.

What of the working of desire in its relation to the desire of the other? What of the desire on the part of the other, as Lacan puts it, at the end of which is the showing (donner à voir)? For we are here amongst painters, who only have eyes for painting. As far as Gilette is concerned she has no part in their commerce; she does not look at the painting, but sees only the painters. And what she remembers of having modelled for him, is that Poussin, while drawing her, was no doubt looking at her, but was not thinking about her (just as he came to her house, without thinking). She does not say: without desiring her.

For it was his desire that she should model for him, yet a desire which did not necessarily pass without explanation, at least for the one who was, as it were, its passing object. And the woman in Gilette might have added in the language which is that of love, according to Lacan, when it begs for a look: ‘You never look at me from the place from which I see you.’ In which she would be mistaken: for it is only in painting that such a request had meaning, and one may at one and the same time (as Sartre said) find a woman beautiful and desire her, at the place from where she is looking at us, on the canvas. But one has to choose between being lover and painter. Poussin will be assailed by doubt at the thought that another person could look at Gilette, and look at her as only he was allowed to see her: naked. But this doubt will soon vanish: the young man will forget his mistress, he will desire only to be a painter, he will see his art and nothing else.

So the first part of the tale ends, as will the second, in a kind of invention – that of the first term of the exchange, which bears the name ‘Gilette’. Now Gilette’s modesty echoes the timidity which was that of the neophyte at the beginning of the tale. For there is nothing, as Balzac remarked at that stage, so similar to love as the youthful passion of an artist when he first enters the presence of a man of genius. The person who has not had this experience will always lack ‘some sort of touch with the brush’, which is the precondition of the masterpiece, even though, in this case, it is the brushstroke of the first and not the last instance. Over/under: ‘Talent must be measured by that initial timidity, that indefinable modesty which those who are destined to achieve renown manage to shed in the exercise of their art, just as the pretty woman loses hers in coquettish play. The frequent experience of triumph diminishes doubt, and modesty may perhaps be a form of doubt.’ The second part of the tale opens with Poussin about to enter Frenhofer’s studio.

He has lost all modesty; he does not doubt any longer. He wishes to see the masterpiece the master keeps concealed (so true it is, as Lacan says, that ‘the truth of the subject, even when he is in the position of master, does not reside in himself, but, as analysis shows, in an object that is, by its nature, concealed’). As if he expected from this invention a revelation, the very one which would make him a painter. His desire dwells there: a desire which is related to the fundamentals of painting, establishes it as praxis. But ‘fundamental’ has more than one meaning as Lacan recalls, incidentally pointing out that in the Kabbala the word designates one of the modes of divine manifestation, which in this register is strictly identified with the pudendum, with that which appeals to and exacts modesty. Modesty – and perhaps doubt? But neither painter nor analyst could stop at the pudendum, or at fundamentals that would take the form of that which is underneath. In the search for beauty, so says Frenhofer,
one should descend into the *innermost depths of the form.* Now beauty, even when immodest, is not easily approached, as the old man says from his experience with his ‘beautiful courtesan’, his ‘Belle Noisette’. *He who has a woman has a quarrel* (and Littre has no sooner recalled this saying than he goes on to speak of the ‘impudent firebrands of quarrel and dispute’). The painter will therefore need modesty enough for two; more love than painter, he will refuse to show his creature, his ‘woman’, and denounce what can only be *prostitution*: ‘My painting is not a painting, it is not a canvas, it is a woman’. Not the Woman, but a woman, whom he then supplies with her name, at least her Christian name, Catherine, though he does not even enquire about the name of Poussin’s mistress (Catherine, of course in reply to Pourbus’ Catherine).

Why should he refuse to show this woman? Because that would be to relinquish his position as ‘father, lover and god’, the trinitarian figure in authority. As if Frenhofer cannot be master – the frenetic master his name speaks of – unless he does not display his masterpiece, a masterpiece so incestuous that to exhibit it would imply breaking the rules upon which the exchange of women is founded. Does he not declare himself ready to kill the man who would soil his masterpiece with a gaze, and ready to burn the painting (which he will in fact do) rather than lay it bare before the sight of a man, and what is more (the progression is explicitly marked in the text), a young man, a painter. The man, the young man will see the woman, or a woman, which to the lover would be intolerable; the painter will see a painting which to the creator would be inadmissible. And yet, Frenhofer will let himself be caught in the game of *potlatch*, of gift and counter-gift: if he yields to it, it is under the effect of this same desire which in having to remain modest falls prey to doubt. In effect, he has to find a model he can use as the mirror in which he can contemplate his painting. When he sees Gilette, he cannot resist: ‘Leave her with me for a moment, and you shall compare her to my Catherine’. You shall compare her. As from now, Frenhofer does not have any further doubts, he has lost all modesty and chosen to abandon it to the gaze of the other. He enjoys in advance the triumph of the beauty of his ‘Virgin’ (as he calls her at that point) over that (as he says again) of a ‘real young woman’: a young woman who, however ‘real’ she may be, is no longer virgin, whereas the ‘Belle-Noisette’, the immodest courtesan, again becomes virgin for a brief instant, in the interval between looks, by singular grace of the exchange.

After the exchange of names, and that of modesties if not virginities, there comes the exchange of looks which closes the cycle. But one should not think here of a triangulation of a geometrical nature: for the play between looks, the structure of the exchange will soon come undone and symmetry will break down. First in the look Frenhofer casts upon Gilette, a look that undresses her, and to which she responds with her flashing glance (‘Pray, am I nothing more than a woman in his eyes?’ But what more does she wish to be? The very woman her love spoke of?). Now, at this decisive moment, decisive for her own modesty, her lover has forgotten her so completely that he does not look at her any longer, engrossed as he is in the contemplation of that other Virgin, which he had at first mistaken for a Giorgione. When she finds him out, Gilette does not hesitate any more (‘Come, let us go upstairs, he has never looked at me like that!’). But such is the modesty of the story that, once Gilette has gone, Poussin cannot bear the thought of her undressing, of Frenhofer looking at her. The ordeal will not last, and when the master invites them into his studio (‘Come in, come in. My work is perfect. Never will painter, brushes, colours, canvas and light produce a rival to Catherine Lescaut, the handsome courtesan, and now with pride, I can show her to you’: show her, but first name her after this river-name which evokes the fatherland of the person who will become Pourbus’ rival, Rubens, and through him the ‘quarrel over colour’ (which is unexpectedly prolonged in *Le Chef d’œuvre inconnu*). Neither Pourbus, nor Poussin will take a look at Gilette. They will see nothing but their art, and, to begin with, a figure, life-size as Pourbus hoped, before which they are overcome with wonder. But once more Frenhofer warns them, that as painting goes, this is only a ‘daub’. They therefore look for the promised painting in comparison with which all others in a certain sense are reduced to the mere state of a sketch, but do not manage to find it. The painter then seizes the opportunity to address them in a speech symmetrical to that previously inspired by Pourbus’ ‘beautiful sinner’. If they do not see what they are looking for it is because they are looking for a painting in the place where they should be looking for a woman. Now, this woman is there, before their eyes, as Edgar Allan Poe’s purloined letter is there before the eyes of the policemen who are completely unable to see it.

Who is mistaken then, the visitors who can see nothing on the canvas that the painter shows them (for in fact, as the story unfolds, it will become clear that it was indeed the woman they were looking for, and not the painting), and that they examine scrupulously, like detectives – or the master who observes them and now intends to disabuse them? Looking as they were for the painting, they at first did not see the woman; and now that she is here before their eyes, they do not see the painting any longer. Frenhofer who was advising them to the contrary not long ago, is now anxious that the illusion be dispelled: if there is a woman, it is only by the effect of art and its material apparatus (‘Yes, yes, that is indeed a canvas, here is the stretcher, the easel, finally here are my colours,
my brushes'). As if art were to reach its pinnacle of achievement through its abolition as such, and one would have to choose between seeing the woman and seeing the picture, or otherwise both might be concealed, as happens here, in the interests of painting pure and simple. With regard to the 'Belle-Noisuse', it is in fact painting which deserves this name, when it provides no information that can be expressed in terms of language, nothing that can be said, nothing that can be spoken, nothing that can be heard, but simply noise. Nothing except for this fragment, this foot escaped from the disaster; a sign that testified in the sight of the two inquisitors to the fact that there is indeed a woman, but a woman whom the painter, seized by this doubt that is modesty, has wished to keep veiled, has concealed, ravished under a cloud, a mist made of a hundred, a thousand, brushstrokes which as Balzac coldly puts it amounts to nothing.

But how are we to understand that this fragment – and not just any fragment, since it is not a hand, or a breast (but Ripa has given us the key to this trick which is not exclusively of a fetishistic order) – that this foot comes back from under the paint, from amongst the ruins of the painting in the very place where Manet was soon to have the incongruous tip of a shoe emerging from under his model's dress? And how are we to understand the avatars of the plait which demands that under the effect of a doubtless misplaced modesty, the woman or rather a woman has come to establish herself in a foundering position, underneath, and the paint to exhibit itself at her expense, on the surface, in such an indiscreet, or should we say immodest fashion, without concealing anything of its behinds, even metaphorically so? That beneath the paint which stole her away from their gazes, the two visitors had invented a woman, was indeed the sort of thing to reassure them and us. Under the paint, and as its 'truth', instead and in the place of the so-called picture, the exchange assuming at last its true face: a woman for a picture, and painting for what forms (or ought to) its subject. It is at this point in the picture where the subterranean, archaeological presence of the woman reveals itself, that something is given to see, something that can be spoken, that can be named, something moreover alive, delectable, a foilthold for desire; in a word, something that looks at us, unlike the inexpressible wall of paint that holds it captive. Something that makes sense where it seemed that only noise existed, but something the invention of which coincides completely with Frenhofer's hopes. For the desire that thus turns everything upside down, and leaves only ruins to be seen, and disarray in place of the expected masterpiece, this desire is in the end the very same as the one which will eventually impel the master to spoil his picture. In one case, just as in the other, its dialectic contributes to what can only be the wholesale upsetting of the field of perception. Frenhofer has finally agreed to show his picture: he will at last find himself constrained to see it as the other sees it. In order to recover it as object of his desire, he will have to turn away from it, steal it away from sight while casting upon the intruders a flashing glance, like the one formerly cast by Gillette, a look that he will believe to be penetrating, an inquisitive gaze, which will arouse in them the only desire capable of restoring the 'Belle-Noisuse' to its exchange value: there is jealously down there, Frenhofer will say, they want to steal her from me. The masterpiece will be excluded from this final exchange of looks, as the poor Gillette has been all this time. But the look of the other will be unquestionably the strongest: when Frenhofer finds himself on his own again, there will be nothing left for him but to kill himself, after burning his pictures.

'FRENHOFER, THAT'S ME'

I could stop here: for Balzac has said everything, perhaps, or said everything that matters to us. Except that I am tempted to invent a continuation or an epilogue to Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu, and to seek this continuation (or epilogue) in the correspondence of Nicolas Poussin himself. In the Spring of 1641, when he was working on the decoration of the large gallery of the Louvre, a young artist he had met in Rome came to offer him his services, as Poussin was soon writing to Chantelou: 'A young man, a painter, whom you wished to see in Rome, has arrived here in this town; he is the one who decorated a chapel in the people's church, where there are depicted some ornaments in grisaille, whose execution pleased you well enough. He has come to see me and offer his services where he may be of use. If it pleases you we shall have him working on the ornaments of the gallery; he composes, is inventive, and colours with fair competence'.

'A young man, a painter', as Frenhofer saw Poussin – and was unsettled by it. But from the fable to history, or chronicle, the situation is reversed: Poussin is no longer the adolescent Balzac describes, without at first naming him (we know that he did in fact run away to Paris in 1612), this neophyte who was held back on the threshold of Poussin’s studio by an indefinite modesty, this 'fledgling', one might be tempted to say, to use the term Poussin applied to himself, but – if not an eagle – a master, became famous in his turn, and as such asked to judge the merits of a novice whose name is only known to scholars. Now, the reasons invoked are worth dwelling upon: indeed, what exactly is invention then if, in listing the various types of competence which are proper to the painter, this particular capacity only comes in second place between those other two parts of painting, composition and colouring, not to mention a more strictly technical knowledge as required by fresco painting? What is the share which belongs to invention if composition, as
we read in the *Encyclopedia*, consists in 'representing any subject whatsoever in the most becoming manner', and takes for granted that '1 – one is well acquainted either from nature or from history, or from the imagination, with all that pertains to the subject; 2 – that one is endowed with the genius which enables all these data to be employed with appropriate taste; 3 – that one derives the handbook of art from study and sustained work, in the absence of which the other qualities remain without consequence'; are we to think that invention, by contrast, calls on nothing but the forces and resources of the mind?

If we keep to what Vasari says about this subject in his Preface to *Lives of the Artists*, invention consists essentially, for him, in knowing how to combine the figures so as to form a 'history' (for instance, a battle) in which each figure would be distinctive by dint of the appropriate posture, gesture and expression, whereas the entirety would convey the intention of the painter, and not, as Vasari oddly adds 'what he was not thinking about', which leaves open the possibility that the unconscious might have had a say in the matter, and that this was a risk invention had to run. It remains the case that, in such a definition, invention does not differ from what the Academy will call 'composition'. If Vasari thinks that Raphael excelled his master Perugino in drawing, colouring and invention, there is no doubt that for him it was in the province of – *arte e ingegno* – intelligence rather than that of the 'handbook of art'. As regards art, a commonplace recurring throughout Vasari's text, and taken up again by Baizac, dictates, that, where the works of his colleagues could literally be described as 'paintings', those of Raphael (and the same goes for the works of Masaccio in their particular epoch) were *living things*, his figures appearing to be made of flesh and not of colours assembled on a canvas; and the same applies to the portrait he painted of the woman he loved, long before Frenhofer and his beautiful courtisan, as well as to the portrait of Pope Julius II, which appeared so vivid, so 'real', that to see it was to fear it as if it was the man himself. Such then would be the name or one of the historical names associated with truth in painting: *life*, this 'mere nothing which is everything'. But it is not enough that the painter should give the appearance of life to his figures, nor that they draw attention to themselves with the force of truth. Assuming that imitation suffices to achieve this manner of truth, invention is set in motion whenever it is a question of putting into pictorial terms an idea, or, as Vasari expresses it, an 'imagination' which may be as complex as you could wish, and no longer be simply a matter of denotation, but also of thought and expression, in the strongest sense of the word: every detail of his 'histories' bears witness to the care Raphael exercised in making known the feelings and passions that stir their actors, 'grief, fear and death', without it being necessary to resort to language (*senza lingua*), with the effect that 'everything, in its silence, seems to speak'.

Poussin did not make any such claims. Or rather his true claims (his claims to truth) were elsewhere. On the one hand, he doubted that his art, fallen as it was into decadence, could aspire to life: 'For poor, unfortunate painting is reduced to the state of engraving, I should rather say of entombment (if anyone has ever seen it alive except in the hands of the Greeks)'; on the other hand, he insisted on putting forward his own claim on behalf of 'mute' or 'tacit' things: as if, for him if not for many others, painting was essentially bound up, in its fundamentals, and as of right, with silence, without by the same token having to abandon all forms of eloquence. The problem therefore was not to pretend that the image only lacked speech, and even less to lend speech to the image (as will be done much later, without all that much thought by the cinema known as 'silent' as if by antiphrasis), but to insert painting within the element which is its own, and to keep it there so that it might live its own life, which is neither that of beings in flesh and bones, nor certainly that of texts, painting being much closer by analogy, to music. The painter must demonstrate that he is *inventive*; and this not only because Poussin was unhappy repeating himself ('I am an innovator; I am not good at copying the things I have already done once'), and did not intend to venture again upon those beaten tracks, but also and above all because he held that there could be no singing without *variations* in tone and mode. Invention labours against the grain of repetition, and reproduction – and this is how painting distinguishes itself from printing. To invent is to vary. But variation does not only comply with formal or productive exigencies, as may be the case in the province of decor ('I have to invent, everyday, something new in order to diversify the stucco relief, otherwise the men would be left without anything to do'). The entire artifice of painting – it is Poussin who makes the point – resides in the fact that every subject which can be depicted calls for some mode of depiction or other and every one of these will retain in itself a 'certain amount of variety from which derives the power of inciting the spirit of the viewer to different types of passion'. Now, to speak of mode is to speak of modality or modalization, but it is also to speak of moderation, measure, the way in which a limit (we shall come back to this point) is assigned to invention which is that of 'true painting'.

We are left with the task of determining the meaning of the *subject*, which the Academy defines as 'the substance upon which one composes', with composition being simply 'the art and the manner in which a painter treats his subject in a painting'. What kind of a substance is this, then, which both can and must be made *subject* to the
creation of something full of spirit\textsuperscript{29} Whether the subject is furnished by the commissioner of the work, or the painter is left free to choose it according to his own devices, and perhaps finally ends up looking for it in books;\textsuperscript{27} it is still necessary in all events to ponder over it,\textsuperscript{28} before finding the thought, and as Poussin goes on to say - before putting it in 'suitable form for a sketch'.\textsuperscript{29} Now, this operation, unlike composition, does not make any borrowings from the handbooks of art or imitation. In the case of a painting M. de Lisle had ordered from him, Poussin will claim to have found the thought, 'that is to say the conception of the idea, and the work of the mind is over. This subject is a Crossing of the Red Sea by the fleeing Israelites. Principally, the composition consists of 27 figures'.\textsuperscript{30} Between the subject (that makes up the substance of the work, if not its cause, its reason, its motif) and the composition, in which it takes upon itself the form of a pictorial statement, there is therefore room for what Poussin still terms the 'thinking' (le pensement),\textsuperscript{31} which corresponds closely to what Freud alludes to under the title of 'considerations of representability', the Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit: for we can only put into painting what lends itself to the process, and the work of the mind consists simply in discovering, through thought, the means of representing a given subject circuitously through the interplay of figures (of which Poussin has always kept an exact count).\textsuperscript{32}

Mute though painting may be, the discourse to which invention is subject, nonetheless belongs with that of rhetoric. The letter-writer Poussin was, when so inclined, said to 'greatly envy the nations, which, being unable to express by word of mouth their most elevated ideas, have invented certain figures, by dint of which they can make others understand what is on their mind'.\textsuperscript{33} Now, it is just the same with painting: to invent, for he who is professionally committed to 'mute things', is - as with a stranger who would make himself understood by those whose language he does not know - to find the means of expressing an idea or concepts, through the intermediacy of an image which, however tacit, is nonetheless a way of making something manifest in a visible form, or 'bringing it to light'.\textsuperscript{34} Thus there is a process analogous to that of the dream: the dream which is, at one and the same time, a kind of hieroglyph, a 'cryptic' discourse, and the only way open for the satisfaction, beneath this veil, of a repressed wish. But this is not the essential point. Rather it resides in the splitting, the pluralization imposed upon the work of translation, or transcription, which is the necessary concomitant of invention whenever painting aspires to equal language through the channels which are its own. In the words of Freud (a reference which is in no way anachronistic, since The Interpretation of Dreams explicitly refers to the process through which painting, long after the times when it borrowed directly from language under the form of phylacteries and different types of inscriptions, discovered its own rules of expression,\textsuperscript{35} in accordance with a process exactly opposite to the one which ensured the transition from 'silent' to 'talking' cinema), whenever the text from which the subject is taken is too abstract to lend itself readily to representation, the painter will have to start off by replacing it with a more concrete and pictorial text, the latter being related to the former in some or other way (through metaphor, symbolization, allegorical transposition etc...) which may then be used as a starting point for the work of composition properly so called.\textsuperscript{36} In the vocabulary of Poussin, this intermediary text has a name: it is the thought of the painting, not to be confused with its 'subject', nor with what Freud has called the dream-thought, or the dream's latent content. Yet the process of painting nonetheless works in the same direction as the dream-work, even though nothing be said of the way in which desire, or even jouissance is articulated across it - desire which does not seem to adapt itself to repetition, and is never free from risk: to the extent that it is unavoidably concerned with novelty, in respect of invention, painting can sin by lack of artifice in respect of composition and execution, while deceiving, by its types of combination, those who have no conception of 'true painting' and grossly deceive themselves.\textsuperscript{37}

We shall not dwell here on the element of invention in Frenhofer's speech, insofar as painting, for him, was not only a matter of imitation, but took it for granted that the painter would not stop at appearances, and managed to retrace the path from effect to cause, that is to say to the idea, if not the subject, in the original meaning of the term, as is testified by the fact that the master painted his masterpiece without resorting to the use of a model ('The mission of art is not to copy nature, but to give expression to it... we have to grasp the spirit, the soul, the features of things and beings. Effects! Effects! Why, they are the accidents of life, and not life itself... Neither painter, nor poet, nor sculptor should separate cause and effect which are inextricably bound up in one another'). Gambara, the hero of the short story which bears his name - which Balzac wrote at the beginning of the summer 1837 while putting the finishing touches to the final version of Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu - this brilliant yet still undiscovered composer, who shows more than one trait in common with Frenhofer, thought along similar lines that until then musicians had concerned themselves more with effects than causes, without giving consideration to the fact that their art followed rules which were not only mathematical (harmony) but physical (sound), the awareness of which would have armed them with new methods and first and foremost with new instruments. But what is valid for music, is valid for painting, although painting only offers something to be seen, where music directly informs our
thoughts, and awakens in the soul 'numb memories': 'Sound is light in another guise: both proceed from variations which come to fruition in man, and are transformed into thoughts by his nervous system. Music, and painting likewise, uses bodies which have the faculty of releasing such or such a property from the original substance, out of which they compose 'tableaux'. In music, the instruments play the part of the colours that the painter employs'. Of this secret complicity between various forms of art, behind the back of nature as it were, a complicity which will disturb Rilke, Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu does not pass mention. But, whatever his ambitions were, Frenhofer did not proceed deductively, but rather strove to take nature by surprise, following its own rules, on the wing, where it took leave of itself, as it were, thus allowing a glimpse of its processes, and in the first place that of the sun, 'this divine painter of the universe'. Yet it was one of the limitations of painting, as propounded by Frenhofer, that it could not entirely renounce line, as long as it recognized light as its original element: 'Line is the means by which man comes to realize the effect of light on objects'.

Where invention, in the classical sense of the term, operates at the conjunction of two wishes, that of the client who has commissioned the work, and perhaps provided the subject, and that of the painter who claims to match himself to that demand; there is a different situation when the artist wants to take account only of his own desire. But there is another kind of invention set in motion as we have seen with consummate art, which asks a more urgent question, the contemporaneity of which might surprise us, a question as difficult to get beyond as, for Frenhofer, was the figure of his 'Belle-Noisette': the invention, by literature and within the terms of a fiction created by means of language, of a picture which would not answer any further, in its appearance, to the conditions of legibility which coincide with those of figuration, a picture at the same time full of noise and yet perfectly silent. Is not an invention of this kind exactly symmetrical (but in reverse) to what the painter (or the art historian) does when he claims to make this 'tact' thing, painting, speak? What meaning – historical, critical, speculative, or even, in the words of the author, metaphysical – does the publication by Balzac of such a picture take on when we not only restore it to its original context (the years 1831–1837), corresponding to the interval between the first version of Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu and its final edition), but also consider it from our own point of view, since we have been through a 'lot in the matter of painting, and would have reason to believe that the lesson of the masterpiece in question, has not remained a dead letter historically speaking? Witness Cézanne who could justifiably cry on hearing the account of Emile Bernard gave him of Balzac's short story: 'Frenhofer, that's me' as if he recognized in the mad old master, the echo of the doubt which assailed him also. And if we agree that modernity in painting is signalled by replacing the superimposition of preparations, undercoatings, glaze, transparencies and varnishes, with a completely different craft founded on flatness, juxtaposition of the strokes, simultaneous contrast, how can we fail to see that the problem of 'what is underneath' will only have been displaced, or transformed, painting having necessarily retained something of its thickness, even though it now claimed only to strive for surface effects. The studies of Josef Albers on the interaction of colours are evidence of this as they demonstrate the way in which, when they are juxtaposed, certain areas of colour appear to pass underneath others, as if plaited or interwoven. The picture traced by Balzac no longer presents any problems for the reader of today: to such an extent that one would be tempted to think, in all innocence, that it could take its place in a museum beside, if not the works of Cézanne, at least those 'walls of paint', Pollock's large panels, and even more appropriately by the side of those artistic productions called 'informal'. Now the first version of the story, published in 1831 in L'Artiste (at which stage it bore the label of 'fantastic tale' which was to disappear in the final version of 1837) did not finish with the destruction of the masterpiece and the death of its author. The artist only showed his visitors to the door of his studio, and then shut himself away again with his painting, and the 'fantastic' element partly derived from this suspense, from the painting being put in 'reserve', which it seems Balzac meant to rectify at a later stage – as if he thought it preferable to put a stop to any unexpected resurgence, any anarchic recurrence in the real of such a fantasy.

Is this to say that Balzac had invented, by literary means, a new type of painting, rather as Nabokov said he dreamed of creating a new species of butterfly (and we know, thanks to Roger Caillois, that the wing is to the butterfly what painting is to man): a possible variety (even if its inventor thought otherwise), as proposed by history, which has given this invention a semblance of consistency – and possible also in the very terms of the theory which is set in place by the tale? Reasoned accounts of the art of painting are few in number – the first version of Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu is in the view of the experts, nothing more than a parable: the parable of the creator who spoils his work through wanting to do too much with it and not knowing when to stop, ('Wait!', Frenhofer cried once again, to the astonishment of Pourbus and Poussin); or the one as we read in the notebooks of Balzac, of 'the fool who can be killed by thought', the element of thought which was absent from the first version of the text, which Balzac, after getting better acquainted with the realities of art – as he would do simultaneously with music, with
Gambara and Massimila Doni, would add to the second version he would call 'philosophical'. Frenhofer, a fool? But how then do we account for the deference Pourbus shows him, the admiration his so-called daub provokes in his visitors, and particularly the fascination which he exerts, this indefinable character, who seems to incant for the neophyte 'by a sudden transfiguration, art itself, with its secrets, its impetuousity, its reverie'? Indeed, how can we justify it, this fascination, if not precisely, by what there is of the indefinable in it; and this is also found in the fantastic literary genre, which shares in the same 'idiocy', at least if we are to believe Balzac and the first version of the Chef d'Oeuvre. 'For all these peculiarities, the modern idiom has only one word: it was indefinable... A wonderful expression. It sums up the fantastic literary genre; it says everything that eludes the narrow perceptions of our mind; and when you have placed it before the eyes of a reader, he is propelled into an imaginary space; then the fantastic springs up, and breaks through like a blade of grass from the midst of the incomprehensible and the impotent.'

In 1837, the fantastic (as far as literature is concerned) will not be in fashion any longer, and nor will the indefinable (that which cannot be described) if indeed Balzac ever let himself get caught by it, and used it to different ends than that of bringing out the equivocal powers of the type of nature he named 'artistic'. Those powers it all too often abuses, 'leading cold reason, the bourgeoisie, and even some connoisseurs, along insensible stony paths where there is nothing for them; whereas the white-winged maiden, in her frolicsome fantasy, discovers epics there, and castles and works of art'. As regards art, neither the expert Pourbus, nor the enthusiastic Poussin will be able to see anything in the masterpiece Frenhofer finally reveals to them; and at first they will believe, like vulgar bourgeoisie, that Frenhofer intended to deceive them ('The old soldier is deceiving us'), but will soon discover that he was deceiving himself (Frenhofer, disciple, saviour, and therefore father of Mabuse, all too aptly so named, whom he had dragged out of poverty and who bequeathed him the power to give his 'realisations', as Cézanne was to put it, this everything which is nothing, life, which however in itself represents a kind of abuse: Mabuse whose power was such that one time when he was particularly poor, he managed to give the brilliance of brocade to the paper clothes he was wearing; in this respect a rival to Raphael, in whose work, fabrics did not appear to be painted, but seemed as if they had been woven of gold and silk).

'Have we not seen the book trade exploiting the word picturesque after literature had killed off the fantastic? Four years after the publication of L'Illustre Gaudissart in which this confession emerges, a confession that speaks volumes on the discourse that was his, Balzac, in the final version of the Chef d'Oeuvre, will no longer pretend to deny himself the picturesque, and to be loath to depict Pourbus' studio at the instant when Poussin enters it, in the steps of the strange old man he has met at the threshold, on whom the dim light of the staircase sheds an archaic hue which remains—from one version to the other—a fantastic hue, the very one of painting itself. 'You might have called to mind a painting by Rembrandt, walking silent and frameless in the dark atmosphere characteristic of this painter.' The first version already offered to be seen out of frame, this character from out of a Dutch painting; and we know that the fantastic has always got on well with the picturesque, even to the extent of disavowing it, and even though, in 1831, Balzac could claim that the arts were so ill 'that there would be a crime in going on making pictures in literature'. But once the fantastic was killed off by literature (as the 'fool' would be killed off by thought), what would remain of Le Chef d'Oeuvre inconnu? And what space could literature still offer to painting? In a century, as we read in Gambara, in which novels get written because they no longer get to the point, would it be necessary for the art of painting to abandon its place totally in order for literature to be able to make pictures anew, and take over their function within the order of description?

The fact that Balzac wrote Gambara on his return from Italy, while he was finishing Le Chef d'Oeuvre inconnu allows one to imagine that he himself was not without doubts as to the final meaning to assign to his invention, once it had been abstracted from the reign of the fantastic, as he was at the same time becoming fully aware of the opportunity fiction provided for philosophical studies or critical writings on painting and music (Massimilla Doni offers an example, as it consists to a great extent of a long commentary on the Moïse of Rossini). If Gambara, the musician, shows more than one trait in common with Frenhofer the painter, their stories take opposite paths. The visitor who has succeeded in entering the miserable room where the composer lives must at first submit to a theoretical exposition on what constitutes the substance of music (sound, which is another form of light), before listening to Gambara accompanying himself on the piano, and sketching out, like an echo of Rossini's Moïse, the broad outlines of his opera Mahomet. Now, if the 'Belle-Noiseuse' could be reduced to a shapeless mist of colours, confusedly massed together, we are dealing in this case with a different type of unknown masterpiece, a kind of 'dazzling cacophony', in which there is not the hint of a thought, whether poetic or musical. An 'impossible music', for which one would need 'new words'. The rest of the story which brings in Gambara as the 'undiscovered Orpheus of modern music', casts some doubt over this. Once he has brought in the instrument which he has invented, the panharmonium, and
can benefit from the aid of drunkenness, the magic of his playing makes of that which first of all seemed to be nothing but a shapeless creation, something to awaken in the audience first surprise, then admiration mixed with surprise, finally plunging them into complete ecstasy; an ecstasy analogous to the one Balzac will describe further on, taking as his example the Saint Cecilia of Raphael he had admired in Bologna which seems like the banner of Massimilla Doni.48 ‘The clouds dispersed, the blue of the sky opened wide, figures of angels appeared…’49 Moreover, the imperfect state of the machine in itself calls for comparison with painting: ‘Often perfection in works of art prevents the soul from expanding them. Is this not the cause in which the sketch triumphs over the finished picture, at the tribunal of those who complete the work in the mind instead of taking it in its already constituted form?’

Does misery, that was Gambara’s lot, suffice to justify the compassion of Massimilla for this master ‘who remained faithful to the ideal we have killed’,51 where Pourbus and Poussin tried their hands at pretence (‘Do you know that in this man we have a very great artist? – He is even more poet than artist, said Poussin with gravity – That, added Pourbus, pointing to the canvas, marks the goal of our art on earth – And from there, and it will pass out of sight into the skies, said Poussin’). Six years separate the first state of Le Chef d’Oeuvre incomptu from its final state, throughout which time Balzac never stopped correcting this short story, adding a great number of new touches. That is to attest the importance he attached to this ‘fantastic tale’ turned ‘philosophical study’, this by grace of writing and without affecting the economy of the narrative. Literature killed the fantastic and it succeeded in doing so paradoxically by giving the story the element of thought which the first version lacked, that very thought which is however supposed to have ‘killed’ Frenhofer, by making him into a ‘fool’. But the fantastic nevertheless retains its rights, in the guise of the indefinable: indefinable, the old master has remained so in his appearance, throughout the two separate versions of the tale. Indefinable too, the so-called painting, which offers nothing precise, nothing definite to be seen, and in which, for all that, we do not recognize the proof of the case won by the sketch against the finished painting. In all events, Pourbus and Poussin will accept it, this painting, just as it is, without adding anything, without pretending to finish it by a process of thought; and how could they have done so since Frenhofer has pushed his work too far, beyond any notion of completion, ‘beside the truth’? The painting takes on an indefinable aspect, which eludes perception, while the fantastic emerges, from the midst of this magma in which incomprehensibility and impotence fight it out together in the form of a living foot, a delectable foot. On the canvas, as Poussin says abruptly, there is nothing. Nothing? That remains to be seen. But Pourbus will find the very word, the new word which will confer on this seemingly meaningless painting, its final signification: ‘How much jouissance over that piece of canvas!’

Jouissance is something to reckon with. But how are we to locate it in painting, on a canvas? And if there is a piece of canvas there, does the piece Pourbus has here in view extend to the entire painting, or is it limited to that one portion where this fragment, miraculously escaped from the destruction, is inscribed? The question is perhaps not out of place at a time when detective investigations are in fashion with reference to the analysis of works of art; whether they concern themselves with the context in which the work emerged, or whether they claim to bring to light what is ‘underneath’, to make the painting speak, to put it to question, at the risk of allowing it to get away. Balzac, who did not see that far, has however provided us with a myth, the virulence of which remains intact. In its definitive version, as we have seen, Le Chef d’Oeuvre incomptu, besides being the story of an exchange which it observes in its most detailed structure (and which the author himself was fully aware of, as testified by the fact that he substituted the name of Gilette for that of Frenhofer in the title of the first part), is that of a double invention. On the one hand the invention, by the two admirers of the old painter, of the painting he kept hidden; on the other, the invention by Balzac, of a kind of painting which not only described nothing, but would be, literally, beyond description; painting would thus by this process bury the picturesque in the same way as literature had done with the fantastic, and again, as Pollock, a full century later, would do with the figure, in the painting so aptly named The Deep: except that literature can say the indescribable and circumvent it with words, declare it as such, while painting can only produce it, by the means which are its own. Indeed the final version of the Chef d’Oeuvre does not have anything of the fable anymore, as the invention of the picture is from this point anticipated by a whole theoretical apparatus. It matters very little, in the end, for us to know where and who Balzac got the idea from – except in so far as we can take note of the resurgence of the question of the name, of authorship: Diderot, Théophile Gautier, Delacroix, Boulanger, etc.52 The essential resides in the function these new developments assume in the context of a narrative, which this addition did not substantially modify, neither in its flow, nor in its economy, but which now seems to have no subject but painting, – painting, in its most material form and therefore, as Delacroix put it, most intimately touching the heart of man.53 But there is a further point which will justify Frenhofer against Pourbus and Poussin, if not against Balzac himself: if the painter is not to begin by drawing the figures, demarcating them, and delimiting
them with a line below colouring them in, and if the contour itself, as again Delacroix will say (but much later), must come last, 'contrary to custom', then the work of painting no longer effectively has any fixed goal, except to veer, as history has shown, to abstraction. In 1845, Balzac would append to the definitive edition of Le Chef d'Oeuvre inconnu in the first volume of his Philosophical Studies the enigmatic and anonymous dedication: To a Lord, followed by four dotted lines. But in the supine which is henceforth that of painting, how can we understand that the object of desire should be so hard at work that we believe we can recognize it beneath the accumulation of touches from the first to the last; and that Balzac had to invent it in order to give literature matter to describe over and against painting, and this at the very moment when paint has finally surfaced in the picture at the expense of what we call the subject, but only to (obstolutely and underhandedly) throw back the question once again?

NOTES
2 - 'I am saying that while painting you should hold a mirror and often look at your work in it; you will then see your work reversed, and it will appear to you as if painted by the hand of another master. Thus you will be able to judge its defects better'. Leonardo da Vinci, Codex Atlanticus, fol. 96or.
3 - Cesare Ripa, Iconologia, overo Descrizione dell'immagini universali cavate dall'antichità e de altri luoghi (Rome, 1593); quoted from the 1603 edition, second part, pp. 574–575.
4 - According to Robert, 'nique' derives from the gallo-roman root 'nick'; whence nickname, in French sobriquet (from sous-briquet, 'blow under the chin'); cf. to nick, 1 - to chip or cut (a stick), to mark, fake (cards), 2 - to guess (the truth, etc).
6 - Ibid., pp. 94–95.
7 - Ibid., p. 10.
8 - Ibid., p. 11.
9 - 'Noisette' from noise, quarrel.
11 - 'I shall then be (.) like the fledgling who leaves the Palus Mothis to fly over Mount Taurin, fearing the eagles who live there' Poussin to Chantelou, 20 March 1644; Correspondance, p. 123. We know of the barb that many think execrable: 'Not a chick (Poussin), but really an eagle.' Poussin as we see, would not have been unaware of it.
15 - 'E rappresenti in uno tratto la intenzione del pitore, e non le cose che e' non pensava', ibid.
17 - 'E di quella fece un ritratto bellissimo che pareva viva', ibid., p. 355. 'Ed egli (.) ritrasse in questo tempo papa Giulio in un quadro a olio, tanto vivo e verace che faceva temere il ritratto a vederlo, come se proprio egli fosse il vivo', ibid., p. 338.
18 - 'Non se può constare minuziosamente le belle avvertenze che uso questo ingegnossisime artefice [. . .] che senza lingua se conosco il dolore, la paura o la morte', p. 360. 'Non si può scrivere le minuzie delle cose di questo artefice che in vero ogni cosa, nel suo silenzio, par che favelli', ibid., p. 361.
19 - Poussin to Chantelou, 7 April 1647; Correspondance, pp. 333–354.
20 - Poussin to Cassiano del Pozzo, 4 April 1642; Correspondance, p. 132.
21 - 'I am not one who always sings in the same tone, and I know how to vary when I wish to'. Poussin to Chantelou, 24 March 1647; Correspondance, p. 352.
22 - Poussin to Chantelou, 3 August 1641; Correspondance, p. 89.
23 - Poussin to Chantelou, 24 November 1647; Correspondance, p. 373.
24 - 'This word “mode” signifies exactly reason or measure, the form of which we use to do something, thus constraining us not to go beyond, making us operate in all things with a certain mediocrity and moderation [. . .]', ibid.
26 - 'I would like to apply myself to the subject V.S. proposes to me, of “Pelea’s wedding”, for one could not find a subject that better offers the opportunity of doing something witty [pleine d’esprit] than this one [. . .], Poussin to Cassiano del Pozzo, 4 April 1642; Correspondance, p. 130–131.
27 - 'I employ a few hours of the evening reading the lives of Saint Ignace and Saint Xavier, in order to find some subject for the painting for the novels’ quarters'. Poussin to Chantelou, 2 July, 1641; Correspondance, p. 89.
28 - 'I shall ponder over the two subjects [Mme de Montmore] has proposed to me'. Poussin to Chantelou, 27 June 1655; Correspondance, p. 436.
29 - Poussin to Chantelou, 25 April 1644; Correspondance, p. 266.
30 - Poussin to Chantelou, 22 December 1647; Correspondance, p. 376.
31 - 'I shall send you the thinking (le pensement) for the frontispiece of the great bible'. Poussin to Chantelou, 30 May 1641; Correspondance, p. 64.
32 - 'Why is it that after having sent you the first of your paintings composed of sixteen or eighteen figures only, and that I could have done the others with a same or lesser number so as to sooner put an end to such fatigue, I have further enriched them without aiming at any interest other than to gain your benevolence'. Poussin to Chantelou, 24 November 1647; Correspondance, pp. 371–372.
33 - Poussin to Chantelou, 5 November 1643; Correspondance, p. 228.
34 - 'Since it pleased you to commission me to do the drawing of the frontispiece of the book of Virgil, and it being the first one I have done to 'bring to light' [mettre en lumière], I come with a simple and reverent silence to dedicate it to you as it is, confident that sometimes silent images hung in a temple by laymen, are no less pleasant to God than the eloquent psalms sung by the priests'. Poussin to Mr de Noyers, 10 April, 1641; Correspondance, pp. 53–54.
35 - Sigmund Freud, Die Traumdeutung (Leipzig and Vienna, 1900), ch. VI, III.
37 - Poussin to Jean le Maire, 19 February 1639; Correspondance, p. 15.
groomed, as polished as the sketch of an amateur; but the arts are so ill that it would be a crime to go on making paintings in literature. Therefore we generally are sparing in images, out of sheer politeness'.

40 – Balzac, Gombara, p. 79.

41 – ibid., p. 106.

42 – 'Since my musical education was indefinitely delaying my work, I decided to take my imagination to Italy, to the great sources of music. We went to see the Saint Cecilia of Raphael and also the Saint Cecilia of Rossini, and also our great Rossini, etc.' Letter to the director of the Gazette Musicale, published in the June 11 1837 issue, to announce the publication of this short story.

43 – Balzac, Gombara, p. 92.

44 – ibid., p. 109.

45 – Cf. my preface to Delacroix's Journal, p. XXV.