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The Politics and Poetics of Ekphrasis in Nineteenth-Century French Art Novels

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THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF EKPHRASIS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH ART NOVELS

By
Sabrina E. Draï Wengier

A DISSERTATION

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THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF EKPHRASIS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH ART NOVELS

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This dissertation explores how literary descriptions of visual artworks affect the narrative and descriptive fabric of a text. The novels I examine operate on three textual levels: the painter's creative struggles, his amorous entanglements with his model and/or the painted women of his canvas, and his aesthetic claims to revolutionize painting. My project argues that ekphrasis is a translational mode that takes two forms: the traditional, "contained" description of a visual artwork; and a mode of writing that pervades the entire text and emulates the characteristics of painting. For example, Balzac's "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu" and the Goncourts' Manette Salomon successfully adopt the ekphrastic mode of writing, transforming the narrative into a canvas where the boundaries between the media are blurred. On the other hand, Zola's L'Oeuvre exploits ekphrasis in order to advance the superiority of literature over painting. At the heart of these Realist and Naturalist texts, the fundamental adherence to the mimetic principle of art is confronted with the nonfigurative experiments of their fictional painters. The female body, as the embodiment of Art and the manifestation of the artist's desire, becomes the symptom of his incursion into abstract painting and the site of the resistance to ekphrasis.
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This dissertation is dedicated to Dan, Isaac, and Sephorah, and to the baby soon to be born.
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Introduction: The Art Novel and the Nineteenth-Century Artistic Milieu

“Ainsi le meilleur compte rendu d’un tableau pourra être un sonnet ou une élégie.”
Charles Baudelaire, Salon de 1846

This dissertation examines the relationship between the visual arts and literature in the context of the nineteenth-century French art novel, specifically Honoré de Balzac’s “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu” (1831), Jules and Edmond de Goncourt’s Manette Salomon (1867), and Emile Zola’s L’Œuvre (1886). Through close readings of the ekphrases in the texts, I show how these novels stage, exploit, and/or upset the relationship between the arts, using and/or emulating painting to innovate in the domain of writing. All three novels represent incursions into new forms of art, whether abstract or Symbolist, and link the artist’s descent into madness with his artistic experiments. I trace this link through the study of ekphrasis and show how the aesthetic of modern, abstract art is what is at play in the artistic discourse of these texts. Before I go further in the investigation of the ekphrastic phenomenon, it will first be useful to review the context in which these works were published.

Nineteenth-century France is a privileged period for a study of the relationship between the visual arts and literature. The Comtesse d’Agoult describes this relationship in the following terms: “[u]n grand mouvement s’était produit dans les arts et dans les lettres. De nombreux talents surgissaient; ils se groupaient, se faisaient cortège, s’éclairaient l’un l’autre d’une lumière splendide…ces talents divers, poètes, écrivains, artistes” (qtd in Wendy Joyce 12). The tight relations that existed between these artists of various media is illustrated by Henri Fantin-Latour’s well-known group paintings,
Hommage à Delacroix (1864; Figure 1) and Un Atelier aux Batignolles (1870; Figure 2).\(^1\) Portraying writers, musicians, sculptors, painters, and art critics alike, Fantin-Latour’s paintings exemplify the exchange of ideas (and sometimes the kinship of ideas and ambition) that existed among artists of all media. Such journals as L’Artiste: Journal de la littérature et des Beaux-Arts, founded in 1831, which included pieces on and by writers, musicians, and visual artists, were also a product of the tight relations characteristic of the artistic milieu of the time. Café life, Salon life, alongside the development of art criticism (a continuation of Diderot’s Salon reviews and essays on painting) and the democratization of art were all conducive to creating a milieu where various artists contributed to forging new views on art and to reshaping the idea of what constituted art and how it should be made and produced.

Articulated first by the Romantic movement in the 1830s, the sense of change that was sweeping the artistic field became gradually more prevalent throughout the nineteenth century. With Romanticism, writers had managed to break free from classicism and the rigid rules it imposed; however, painters and sculptors faced a more concrete adversary because of the extraordinary weight, authority, and presence of the Académie des Beaux-Arts. Recognition of one’s work by the Academy meant public and economic success as it dictated the *bon goût* of the time. The Ecole des Beaux-Arts, a *passage obligé* for artists seeking recognition, functioned as an extension of the Académie as many academicians taught there or in private studios where they prepared

\(^1\) Hommage à Delacroix portrays the following writers and art critics: Louis Edmond Duranty, Jules Champfleury, Charles Baudelaire; and painters and sculptors Alphonse Legros, James Whistler, Edouard Manet, and Félix Bracquemond. Un Atelier aux Batignolles stages the German painter Otto Scholderer, Frédéric Bazille, Claude Monet, Edouard Manet (at the easel), Auguste Renoir along with writers and art critics Zacharie Astruc and Émile Zola, and Édmond Maitre, a close friend of Bazille.
students for the Ecole. Académie members sat in various juries, notably for the prestigious Prix de Rome (whose winner was rewarded with four years of study at the Villa Medici, the seat of the Academy in Italy) and for the yearly Salons.\(^2\) While the Salons were state events taking place in the Salon Carré of the Louvre, they were organized by the Academy and a jury comprised of its members selected the works to be exhibited.

Academic style sought to emulate the Renaissance and Antiquity and emphasized drawing, composition, and subject matter. Artists were limited to biblical or classical subject matter as these were the only ones deemed worthy of representation. Artists were meant to strive to attain and reproduce the classical canons of beauty of Antiquity rather than to copy from nature directly. Just as there was a hierarchy of genres (historical paintings being the highest genre), there was to be a clear hierarchy in the way the various elements were arranged on canvas so that the meaning of the work would become manifest through the composition. The Academy’s insistence on drawing also meant that color was seen as complementary to the design but not essential to it; as Blake and Frascina put it: “colour traditionally served to do little more than ‘fill in’ a drawing and had scant value in its own right” (62). Academic paintings were also characterized by their smooth surface and their polished finish: the artist attempted to render the brushwork invisible so that no texture would appear on the surface of the canvas; art was not considered a craft but rather an intellectual endeavor and the demand to cancel out the work of the artist is reminiscent of this idea. The illusion of mimesis had to be intact and the spectator had to be drawn effortlessly into the canvas. As Blake and Frascina

\(^2\) Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres presided over the Villa Medici from 1835 to 1840.
conclude about the Academy: “[It] sustained a complete ideology of art: a set of assumptions, beliefs and attitudes about what art should be, what made a painter an artist, where art fitted into society and what kind of society it fitted into. The Academy was a conservative body, both in art and politics” (61; authors’ emphasis).

Academic art was thus official art and while Romanticism managed to impress its mark if only subtly on the Academy (through Delacroix’s influence notably), Realism and Impressionism latter on were faced with complete rejection. Realist and Impressionist painters stood at odds with the beliefs and teachings of the Academy and yet, being accepted by and exhibiting at the official Salon was an honor all aspired to. The Academy’s unwavering resistance to new forms of art led to Courbet’s famous Pavillon du Réalisme in 1855, staged to protest the refusal of his works at the Exposition Universelle. As early as the advent of Romanticism, writers begun penning art criticism (Gautier and Baudelaire, among others) in order to support and defend the ambition of the visual artists who claimed the right to experiment with color (Delacroix for instance) and to adopt modern life as the worthy subject matter of their art (Courbet’s Realism for instance). Writers, art critics and painters alike protested what they perceived as being the systematic rejection of their experiments by the Academy. In 1846 for instance, out of nearly 5000 submissions, only 2400 were selected for the official salon (Eitner 290). In 1863, where more than 3000 paintings had also been refused by the jury of the Salon, Napoleon III agreed to open a Salon des Refusés as a pendant to the official venue, in which artists who had been denied were granted the opportunity to show their work and be judged directly by the public.
It is during this period of artistic turmoil and radical change that the texts of my corpus were written and published, and they reflect, to a certain degree, these changes and the radical opposition to academic art and teachings.³ “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu,” Manette Salomon, and L’Œuvre belong to a rich literary tradition in French literature inaugurated by Charles Nodier’s novella “Le Peintre de Salzbourg” (1803; Niess 6). This story of a young unfortunate painter whose beloved—also an artist—marries another man and dies focuses exclusively on the love story between the painter and his lover rather than on any aesthetic issues. The genre of the “artist novel” to which Nodier’s novella belongs became gradually more focused on the psychology of the artist, first with regard to his relationship with his model (with whom he usually falls in love), and second to his art (his artistic struggles). Among the most well-known of the genre are Théophile Gautier’s “La Toison d’or” (1839), Balzac’s “Pierre Grassou” (1839), and Guy de Maupassant’s Fort comme la mort (1889). This particular genre has been referred to indiscriminately as “artist novels” (Maurice Beebe in his seminal study of artist figures Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts), “atelier narratives” (Wendy Joyce), and “fictions about painters” by Theodore Bowie (in his specialized essay The Painter in French Fiction).

Bowie argues that fictions about painters have ten main characteristics (I paraphrase here): the description of the painter’s early days; the description of his milieu (including his studio and/or the natural, open air settings he chooses); his artistic discourse with fellow artists (where he exposes his aesthetic ideals, beliefs, and

³ This artistic turmoil accompanied profound historical changes in France at the time such as the July Monarchy, the Second Empire and the 1848 revolution which marked the political and social climate of the country.
ambitions); the critique of the art institutions of the time (the Academy in particular); descriptions of the Salons; the presence of a literary figure as counterpart to the artist; love entanglements with women; and the inclusion of some real artists of the time, making them romans à clefs (Bowie 6-7). For Bowie, only Zola’s L’Œuvre and the Goncourts’ Manette Salomon contain all of these elements.

I have chosen the term “art novel” rather than any other commonly used term in order to forge a fictional subcategory. Bowie argues that these texts in general are “a special branch of art criticism” (5) in that not only do they cast a painter as a protagonist but they also reflect on the aesthetic of the painter. I believe that Balzac’s “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu,” the Goncourts’ Manette Salomon, and Zola’s L’Œuvre more than any other texts of the genre follow this description, offering true insight into the changing aesthetic of the nineteenth century and, as far as the Goncourts’ and Zola’s texts are concerned, into its artistic life and milieu. Like all other artist novels, the triangular relationship between the artist, his model, and his work of art is central as is the myth of Pygmalion that underlies the texts. One major difference with the Greek myth is that the artists need to become demiurge in order to bring their Galatea to life—Venus is no longer present to breathe life into the statue.

Just as the artist-model couple inspired a great deal of nineteenth-century texts, the trope became common in visual depictions of the artist. Paintings of artists’ studios and artists in general often portray the model at his side (one can think here of Courbet’s L’Atelier du peintre 1855). A fine illustration of this triangular relationship is Ingres’ Raphaël et la Fornarina (1814; Figure 3). At the center of the painting, the model, in the painter’s arms, is looking at us. Raphael, sitting at his easel but facing away from it, turns
his head, looking at his work in progress, *La Fornarina* (1518-20). The fact that the artist’s eyes are directed toward La Fornarina’s image on canvas rather than toward her flesh-and-blood counterpart indicates the artist’s desire for and attraction to (the female figure in) his artwork, at the expense of the flesh-and-blood woman who serves as the model. The painting within the painting, *La Fornarina*, although it is situated at the edge of the canvas and is only half visible, soon catches the spectator’s eye. The viewer’s curiosity is aroused precisely because *La Fornarina* is partly hidden and because it has Raphael’s full attention. Although this painting within the painting remains at the margins, it is nevertheless central to the drama played out in Ingres’s canvas. The embedded painting, with its imposing and yet partly hidden presence of a female figure on canvas, represents the draw art exerts on its creator. In the three literary texts of my corpus, the embedded painting is replaced by ekphrasis, which gives a presence in the text to the painted object and the female figure.

“*Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu,*” *Manette Salomon,* and *L’Œuvre* have often been studied together because of their thematic kinship. Research has either focused on the character of the painter (Bowie, Milner) or that of the female model (Joyce, Lathers, Starr), and recently, Hans Belting examined the concept of the masterpiece in nineteenth-century literature and artistic practice. Research on the figure of the painter has tended to be psychological, paying special attention to the representation of the creative process, the evolving madness of the painter and failure to fulfill his ambition. Such studies also focus on what these texts say about the writer’s projection of his own artistic struggles onto his artist protagonist. A recent feminist trend has attempted to recover the figure of

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4 There is another painting in the background, a reproduction of Raphael’s *Madonna of the Chair* that also casts its imposing presence on the couple.
the female model which has heretofore been largely ignored. Feminist critics have focused on the central role the model plays in the creative process and have shown the objectification of the model in the hands (and eyes) of the artist. Obsessed with his art, the painter fails to see the model for the woman that she is. Marie Lathers has furthermore shown the model’s liminal state in-between art and life, and has studied her function within the Realist and Naturalist aesthetic of the nineteenth century.5

Lathers contends that the figure of the female model replaced the figure of the Romantic muse and she suggests that the rise and fall of the female model corresponds with the rise and fall of literary Realism and Naturalism as they are gradually replaced with psychological and symbolist novels (2). For Lathers:

In terms of genre, [the model’s] appearance in the fiction of the nineteenth century is tied, again, to the realist conception of representation—to its demands and desires. The model does more than function as character in these works; she makes these works function by “helping” the artist not only in his construction of the artwork but also the writer to define literary realism and naturalism. And she helps us, readers and spectators, to question what is real and what is not real, that is, what we wish to label real and not real. (13; author’s emphasis)

In other words, the model functions as an enabler for both the artist and the writer and, as Lather suggests, she is a symptom of a certain conception of “the real.” But the model is also fiction par excellence in the sense that she is never what she seems; as a model, she is staged, made to stand in for someone else. She is a reality that is manipulated by the artist and that comes out of the mind of the artist. Through the pose and the artistic process, her body is transformed and transferred from corporal into aesthetic as image.

5 This feminist trend follows the example of cultural historians who have also focused on the life of female models. To cite only a few: France Borel’s The Seduction of Venus: Artists and Models (1990); Eunice Lipton’s Alias Olympia (1992); Tamar Garb’s Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-siècle France (1998); Susan S. Waller’s The Invention of the Model: Artists and Models in Paris, 1830-1870 (2005).
She is thus a multifaceted being whose body is conceived of as a malleable object that is processed through the artist’s mind and imagination and is then translated into canvas.

The presence of the model in Manette Salomon and L’Œuvre (and its notable absence in “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu”) and its gradual disappearance from the texts is reminiscent of the tension between the Realist/Naturalist economy of the texts on the one hand, and the radical experiments of the painter on the other. The model’s body confronts the artist with the genius of nature and functions as a constant link with reality; the distortion of this same body on canvas corresponds with the gradual loss of perception by the artist and with his foray into new forms of art. The “reality” of the female body must thus be done away with by the artist if he wants to attain his artistic ambition.

Whereas feminist critics have strived, and managed, to recover the body of the female model in these texts, this dissertation seeks to recover the “other” body of the model, the one laid on canvas by the artist, and to show how problematic this body is for both the painter and for the narration. This double, painted body is the motor of the narration, triggering the artist’s aesthetic struggles, becoming the unrepresentable on canvas, and the ineffable in the text—what escapes or resists description and ekphrasis in particular. This painted female body is central to the modernity of “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu,” Manette Salomon, and L’Œuvre as the aesthetic issues raised in these texts concern the (un)representability of this female body within an aesthetics based on mimesis. By focusing on ekphrasis and the ekphrastic phenomenon in these three texts (and therefore on the description of this female body), I am able to locate the creation, undoing, and sometimes disappearance of this second female body. Ekphrasis thus allows
me to focus on the issue of representation both at the level of pictorial and the verbal (I will explain this further in Chapter One).

In *The Invisible Masterpiece*, Hans Belting touches on the modern aspect of these texts but rather focuses on the nineteenth-century art criticism and on the changing conditions of the production of a work of art (with the institutionalization through museums and Salons, and the development of a capitalist market of art). Belting thus proposes a “conceptual history of the modern work of art” (7), in particular “the ideal of absolute art, which persistently drove artistic production but always eluded it” (12). He shows how modern art, i.e. the abstract art of the twentieth century was also a reaction against “the compulsion to produce works of art” (15). Relevant to the topic of this dissertation, Belting points out that the nineteenth century introduces the idea of art as a “programme” (13):

A new type of art discourse guided not only the viewing but the production of art too. Any given work was expected to compensate for the loss of a reliable and generally valid definition. And so the modern artist’s struggle was not merely a continuation of the artist’s perennial effort of self-expression, it had the task of demonstrating, a conception of art that had general validity. From now on a new work was by definition a kind of programme that was judged as an argument for a general theory of art. (12)

In a chapter devoted to “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu,” *Manette Salomon*, and *L’Œuvre*, and Henry James’s “The Madonna of the Future,” Belting shows how the idea and ideal of an absolute masterpiece weighs on the artists and prevents them from achieving their ambition. He argues that whereas there used to be masterpieces without a concept, now there were concepts without masterpieces (136). Indeed, Frenhofer in Balzac’s short story, Coriolis in *Manette Salomon*, and Claude in *L’Œuvre* all strive to create the absolute masterpiece that will embody their aesthetic program. However, I believe that
their aesthetic program changes without their being aware of it—they believe (except for Frenhofer whose discourse is radically different from the onset) that they still function in a Realist/Naturalist conception of art when they have actually moved on from it. This dissertation, through the careful study of ekphrasis, seeks to show this major discrepancy.

DISSERTATION OUTLINE

Chapter One lays the theoretical basis for the dissertation. Building on Murray Krieger’s work and using translation theory, I establish my own definition of ekphrasis as an intersemiotic translation that mediates visual and written signs and whose point of resistance lies in the representation of the female body. Indeed, what constitutes the essential substance of an artwork, according to Walter Benjamin, is “the unfathomable, the mysterious, the ‘poetic.’” I argue that in its dual existence as a flesh-and-blood woman and as an artistic creation on canvas, the female model embodies this link but is also the point of resistance of the ekphrastic process.

In the second chapter, I first analyze Balzac’s channeling of Rembrandt’s techniques—especially his use of light—in the composition of his own descriptions. I then follow the fictional master Frenhofer’s own ekphrasis of his canvas and the lessons in interpretation he provides throughout the text in order to read his last painting. By laying the emphasis on what lies beneath the surface of a canvas rather than what is immediately visible, Frenhofer exemplifies his vision of paintings as palimpsests. And by

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6 What I mean by this and which I explain in greater detail in Chapter One is that all translations present difficulty. In my texts, the main difficulty lies in the translation of the female body both on canvas and textually.
letting the image of a perfect foot emerge from a “brouillard de formes,” Frenhofer turns mimetic art into an anamorphic stain.

In Chapter Three, I identify the Goncourts’ *écriture artiste* as the most accomplished instance of the ekphrastic mode of writing. Through the elasticity of their syntax, the use of the technical vocabulary of painting and their emphasis on impression and observation, the Goncourts emulate the medium of painting. They create an impressionistic way of writing that materializes into what Hartzell has termed “tableaux littéraires” or scenes depicted as though they were paintings. In this chapter, I show how the female body becomes the very “stuff” of creation, both of the artist Coriolis’s paintings and of numerous masterful descriptions by the Goncourts. I also argue that Coriolis’s last painting, a “hallucinated” experiment with pure color that is left “undescribed,” illustrates the limits of the *écriture artiste* as practiced by the Goncourts.

Finally, my last chapter examines Zola’s *L’Œuvre* in the context of Zola’s art criticism and his own endeavors as a creative artist. Often interpreted as an extension of his journalism, *L’Œuvre* stands as Zola’s final judgment on Realism, Impressionism, and Naturalism in art. Zola focuses on the psychological aspects of creation and the struggles of the artist who tries to compete with nature and create life through art. Zola exploits ekphrasis, producing his own “tableaux littéraires” of Paris notably, subtly pitting them against Claude’s failed canvases of the city. Claude’s last canvas, an embodiment of Paris as a jewel-adorned nude woman, illustrates his descent into madness and reveals his true nature as a Symbolist, Zola’s antithesis for Naturalism.
Chapter One: Ekphrasis and “The Unfathomable, the Mysterious, the ‘Poetic’”

The first recorded and perhaps most famous instance of ekphrasis is Homer’s description of the making of the Shield of Achilles by Hephaestus in *The Iliad*. Thetis, Achilles’ mother, has come to ask the renowned smith to make her “short-lived son” (18.458) a shield so that he can join the fight against Troy, kill Hector, and avenge the death of Patroclus. The making of the shield announces that Achilles will fulfill his destiny as a true hero at the same time as it heralds his death. Thetis informs him: “Then I must lose you soon, my child, by what you are saying, since it is decreed your death must come soon after Hector’s” (18.95-96). The shield is thus a temporary protection granted to Achilles so he can perform a final heroic act but it is also a reminder and a sign of his mortality.

As Hephaestus starts his labor, Homer tells us:

First of all he forged a shield that was huge and heavy, elaborating it about, and threw around it a shining triple rim that glittered, and the shield strap was cast of silver. There were five folds composing the shield itself, and upon it he elaborated many things in his skill and craftsmanship. (18.477-482)

The materials used to make the shield, its size and weight, along with its “composition” are here mentioned. This initial passage could have been all that was necessary to evoke the shield but Homer, just like his smith, “elaborates it about” and describes in depth each of the elements Hephaestus wrought on it. The different scenes Hephaestus depicts are mostly related to human life and experience: “marriage, litigation, ploughing, sheep-

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7 All *Iliad* quotes are taken from Richmond Lattimore’s translation (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1951). The reference indicates the Book and line rather than the page. I have modified the spelling of Greek names in the text, e.g. Hector for Lattimore’s Hektor.
herding, cattle-driving, grape-harvesting, festivals, dancing, singing, and acrobatics” and representative of the “Mycenean civilization that Achilles sets out to defend” (Heffernan 11).

However, none of these scenes, wrought on a shield, conforms to the idea of what a still “scene” should be, as each is put into motion by Homer’s words. While depicting a vineyard for instance, Hephaestus inscribes the following scene:

Young girls and young men, in all their light-hearted innocence, carried the kind, sweet fruit away in their woven baskets, and in their midst a youth with a singing lyre played charmingly upon it for them, and sang the beautiful song for Linos in a light voice, and they followed him, and with singing and whistling and light dance-steps of their feet kept time to the music. (18. 567-572)

The adverb “charmingly” and the adjectives “beautiful” and “light” evoke the pleasant atmosphere of the scene. The swift movement of the young men and women carrying the fruit baskets and dancing to the sound of the lyre tends to make the reader forget that this is supposed to be a still scene on the fold of a shield. Rather, the passage creates a visual (and aural) image of a group of young people enjoying themselves.

The description of the making of the shield reads as a series of colorful vignettes that evoke different facets of life, whether pleasant as the above cited one, or difficult—litigation, death, and war. The impression it creates is that of a world within the world as it leaves the reader with a viable microcosm that lives, animated by the suggestiveness of the language used.

W. J. T. Mitchell explains that:

Homer’s whole point seems to be to undermine the oppositions of movement and stasis, narrative action and descriptive scene, and the false identifications of medium with message, which underwrite the fantasies of ekphrastic hope and fears. The shield is an imagetext that displays rather
than concealing its own suturing of space and time, description and narration, materiality and illusionistic representation. (Picture 178)

Mitchell’s use of the term “imagetext” situates the shield-making episode at the confluence of what are usually conceived of as binary opposites. Homer negotiates and works within these distinctions, making them visible by creating images that are “already in motion, already narrativized” (Mitchell Picture 178). Homer’s ekphrasis presents a shield being made rather than a finished product and the ekphrasis, by setting in motion the various elements that Hephaestus includes, reflects and participates in the creative process.

However dynamic, vivid, and suggestive the ekphrasis of the shield might be, Heffernan points out, it is ultimately made of words, rather than images: “All we can see—all that already exists in this passage—is Homer’s language, which not only rivals but actually displaces the work of art it ostensibly describes and salutes” (14; my emphasis). Heffernan and Mitchell’s respective readings of this episode highlight the main issues related to ekphrasis: the paradox of creating and animating images through words, the complementarity of image and text (Mitchell), and/or the rivalry between the two (Heffernan). This dissertation will strive to re-place, or resituate, the work of art in this tension between complementarity and rivalry, and to understand the relationship ekphrasis establishes between the written and the visual through the writer’s “displacement” of the visual. In the present chapter, I will first summarize the various ways scholars have defined ekphrasis, review the “problems” of ekphrasis (as understood by its critics), and explain the practice of ekphrasis, focusing on how it operates in a text and situating it in the context of the art novels of my corpus.
DEINING EKPHRASIS

In *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, Ruth Webb focuses on the ancient practice of ekphrasis in the Greek schools of the Roman Empire and on the definition of it that was given to the students: “A speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes” (1). Webb underlines the fact that initially, this rhetorical practice was not linked to the visual arts but that its goal was to “make an audience imagine a scene” (3). She furthermore insists on the freedom of format ekphrasis enjoys, explaining that it can be of any length, of any subject matter, composed in verse or prose, using verbal techniques, as long as it “brings its subject before the eyes,” or, as one of the ancient authors says, “makes listeners into spectators.” Mere words are credited with the ability to make absent things seem present to the spellbound listeners, to control the contents of the most intimate of faculties, the imagination. So, while the visual arts may literally be absent from this definition of ekphrasis, and from most of the discussions by ancient rhetoricians, the idea of the visual underpins this mode of speech which rivals the effects of painting or sculpture, creating virtual images in the listener’s mind. (8-9; my emphasis)

The classical practice and understanding of ekphrasis illuminates several essential features that continue to be important in its modern practice. First and foremost, ekphrasis is about performance, about affecting the listener, and making what is absent (an image) present, thereby transforming the audience into spectators. Second, the idea of ekphrasis as performance asserts its seductive aspect and emphasizes the fact that it is not a solitary enterprise. Rather, it requires an audience in order to exist and function. Finally, because of the difference of medium between what is absent (the visual) and what is present (the verbal), the connection it entails between the two media constitutes an integral part of the challenge of ekphrasis.
In its ancient practice, then, ekphrasis is a performing act that manages to create and bring to life an image whose referent need not be visual. In its modern definition, critics have struggled with various aspects of the ancient understanding of it. Jean Hagstrum, in the highly influential *The Sister Arts*, analyzes the relationship between poetry and painting in the neoclassical period and more specifically in the context of the pictorial imagery of British poetry. He uses the term “ekphrasis” only four times, twice in footnotes, and defines it as “that special quality of giving voice and language to the otherwise mute art object” (18). Hagstrum adds the dimension of the visual art to his definition, which he argues remains in keeping with the etymology of the word; the Greek root of ekphrasis is *ekphrasein*, meaning “to speak out,” “to tell in full” (18). The etymology insists on the act of putting into words but says nothing of art.

Leo Spitzer, in his 1955 study of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (a renowned ekphrastic poem) departed from the Greek etymology, defining ekphrasis as “the poetic description of a picture or sculptural work of art” (qtd in Webb 34). Spitzer therefore delineates the field of ekphrasis, restricting it to the realm of art—poetry on the one hand and painting / sculpture on the other. Moreover, Spitzer’s definition imposes an additional limit by stating that ekphrasis belongs to the realm of description. James Heffernan’s definition, while sounding more general, reveals itself equally if not more restrictive because he considers ekphrasis to be “the verbal representation of visual representation” (3). Like Spitzer, Heffernan circumscribes ekphrasis to the arts. He also adds a mimetic dimension to the term through the use of the word “representation.”

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8 Ruth Webb identifies the acceptance of ekphrasis being “tied” to the visual (and the visual arts) to the nineteenth-century.

9 This is reminiscent of Simonides’s saying: “Painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture.”
him, what ekphrasis seeks to represent “must itself be *representational*” (4; author’s emphasis), thus portraying ekphrasis as a doubly mimetic practice.

Murray Krieger’s 1991 seminal study *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, which has become a reference for any investigation of ekphrasis, examines the way literary criticism has addressed ekphrastic poetry. Krieger builds on Spitzer’s definition while seeking to enlarge the scope of ekphrasis to what he calls “word-painting” (9), that is, descriptions devoted to the visual more generally rather than to the limited field of works of art. For Heffernan, Krieger “stretches ekphrasis to the breaking point” (2) in the sense that it becomes too broad and designates too large a literary body. Finally, Mitchell, who relies heavily on Krieger and Heffernan, defines ekphrasis as “a curiosity: it is the name of a minor and rather obscure literary genre (poems which describe works of visual art) and of a more general phenomenon (the verbal representation of visual representation)” (152), readily situating ekphrasis as both a genre and a topic.

As becomes evident from reading multiple authors’ definitions of the word, ekphrasis is an “umbrella term” (Yacobi 599) that adapts to the theorist’s needs and concerns. A few facts, however, can be ascertained: ekphrasis has been linked to poetry rather than prose, and it is a mimetic description and practice dependent upon the existence of a visual artwork, be it real or imagined.

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10 Krieger’s is one of the first book length studies of the ekphrastic phenomenon, following its evolution as corresponding to the recession of the supremacy of the visual in favor of that of language. He traces this evolution through an analysis of epigrams, that is, mere accompaniments to the work of art; to the emblem poetry of the Renaissance, which sets itself as the visual companion to a poem and that signals a shift from the “natural sign picture” (of the epigram) to the “picture as code” (*Ekphrasis* 22).
EKPHRASIS AND MIMESE

Heffernan’s definition of it as “the verbal representation of a visual representation” would probably not place ekphrasis at the top of Plato’s list of favorites because it removes it three times from the Truth. A common gesture of ekphrastic scholarship is to compare the ekphrasis with what it is supposed to imitate, i.e. its visual source. This is comparatively easy when the work of art is real and traceable, but it becomes complicated when the source has been lost or when it is imagined (what John Hollander calls “notional ekphrasis” (209)). The lack of concrete referent thus thwarts the “representational” task of ekphrasis and gives it the additional duty of becoming a substitute for its missing “origin.”

This implicit and usually accepted idea of ekphrasis as mimetic runs into a flurry of limitations and as Michael Riffaterre justly points out, “la mimésis double, représentation de représentation, est plus proche d’une illusion référentielle que de l’autenthique reproduction d’un objet” (211). The semantic issue of representation vs. reproduction vs. recreation vs. creation lies at the heart of the ekphrastic enterprise, as well as at the heart of any creative process. The illusion of ekphrasis, according to Riffaterre, is to make us believe that it represents the work of art in an unmediated manner, when, as a mode of enunciation, it really represents the vision of the writer (221). In other words, studies of ekphrasis, such as Krieger’s or Heffernan’s, are caught up in the often unchallenged assumption that words offer mediation whereas an image is “a visual substitute for its referent” (Krieger 2).

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11 I will discuss this further on in the chapter.
René Magritte’s famous painting *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* (1928-1929) makes explicit what is “not so obvious,” that is, the fact that even though the painting presents to us a perfect pipe, that pipe is an *image*, not the object one uses to smoke. In other words, the image of the pipe is not a substitute for the pipe.\(^{12}\) In the same way, ekphrasis cannot stand in for and take the place of the visual artwork it is meant to represent. Krieger makes the point that *trompe l’œil* paintings perhaps more than any other genre of painting point to the artifice of art because they try to substitute themselves for reality but simply cannot do so (or rarely can as in Zeuxis’ story; 208-9). Ekphrasis then, while being (or attempting to be) a mimetic practice, always refers back to its own impossibility *to be* the visual object.

**Krieger, Space, and Time**

For Murray Krieger, images are still, spatial entities that offer unmediated access to their referent. In his view, images belong to the sensible world and are subjected to a desire for the “natural sign,” that is, an aesthetic than posits the visual, the eye, as the main source of perception and that considers the (visual) sign as a “visual substitute for its referent” (“Problem” 5). On the other hand, Krieger considers words to be inherently temporal and arbitrary, providing a mediated and coded access to representation. For Krieger, the tension between the “spatial fix” and “the freedom of the temporal flow” constitutes the problem of ekphrasis (“Problem” 5). Ekphrasis thus asks of language to perform an unnatural act: to represent what is quintessentially spatial while it itself is quintessentially temporal. In other words, “ekphrastic ambition gives to the language art

\(^{12}\) Interestingly, the written part of the painting, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe,” becomes a textimage, to reverse Mitchell’s terms, and could be seen as an ekphrastic statement on the painting to which it belongs.
the extraordinary assignment of seeking to represent the literally unrepresentable,” “to
freeze itself into a shape” (“Problem” 4-5).

For Krieger, classical ekphrasis was
called upon to intrude upon the flow of discourse and, for its duration, to
suspend the argument of the rhetor or the action of the poet; to rivet our
attention upon a visual object to be described, which it was to elaborate in
rich and vivid detail. It was, then, a device intended to interrupt the
temporality of discourse, to freeze it during its indulgence in spatial
exploration. (Ekphrasis 7)

This is what Krieger has also called the “exhilaration of the ekphrastic process”
(“Problem” 5), that is, the thrill that the stilling of the temporal produces. It is as though
ekphrasis lured the verbal with the promise of the plenitude of the spatial. But the
language Krieger uses comes at odds with this lure, as he employs the verbs “to intrude,
to suspend, to rivet, to interrupt, to freeze” by which he means that ekphrasis stalls the
narration and upsets its nature.

Implicit in Krieger’s argument is the idea that ekphrasis is an additional element
that never fully belongs to the verbal even though the verbal invited it (or used it). I
should like here to briefly recall Derrida’s discussion of Kant’s Third Critique, where
Derrida explains the concept of ornament, or parergon, as I believe it sheds light on the
“interruption” ekphrasis causes to a text.

Le parergon inscrit quelque chose qui vient en plus, extérieur au champ propre [...] mais dont l’extériorité transcendant ne vient jouer, jouxter, frôler, frotter, presser la limite elle-même et intervenir dans le dedans que dans la mesure où le dedans manque. Il manque de quelque chose et se manque à lui-même. (65; author’s emphasis)

The parergon thus plays with the limits imposed upon it (inside/outside notably), turning
them into permeable boundaries contaminated by each other. The limits become places of
friction where both sides enjoy playful interaction. Ekphrasis, in that sense, plays both
with the visual and the verbal and indicates a lack inherent to the verbal mode. Ekphrasis is as much a product of the lack (because there is a lack, the presence of the *parergon* is necessary) as a producer of the lack (its presence is what makes the lack visible).

Furthermore, the idea of interrupting and suspending presupposes a well-defined beginning and end. But as Derrida suggests,

Le *parergon* se détache à la fois de l’*ergon* (de l’œuvre) et du milieu, il se détache d’abord comme une figure sur un fond. Mais il ne s’en détache pas comme l’œuvre. Elle se détache aussi sur un fond. Le cadre parergonal se détache, lui, sur deux fonds, mais par rapport à chacun de ces deux fonds, il se fond dans l’autre. […] Toujours une forme sur un fond mais le *parergon* est une forme qui a pour détermination traditionnelle non pas de se détacher mais de disparaître, de s’enfoncer, de s’effacer, de se fondre au moment où il déploie sa plus grande énergie. (71-73)

In other words, the *parergon*, and ekphrasis as such, dissolves its own limits and, at the same time, compromises the limits of its interior, or in the case of ekphrasis, of the verbal.

**EKPHRASIS AND THE PARAGONE**

Krieger’s theory functions in a reading of ekphrasis as a *paragonal* practice. The *paragone* is the name given to the contest between different art media, notably painting and poetry.¹³ Because ekphrasis establishes a bridge and forces a link between painting and literature, it has either been regarded as promoting the notion of the “sister arts” or as being an agent of discord, the latter more often than the former. For Heffernan, ekphrasis is “intensely paragonal,” staging a sibling rivalry that revolves around the “struggle for dominance between the image and the word” (1). Far from a collaborative enterprise

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¹³ One of the apologists of the *paragone* was Leonardo who insisted on the superiority of painting over poetry, elevating the sense of sight as the noblest and the creative power of the painter as being closest to God’s (Hagstrum 66-70).
then, Heffernan views ekphrasis as one medium’s will to dominate and control the other.

In *Salome and the Dance of Writing*, Françoise Meltzer also underlines this conflictual relationship, analyzing the treatment of (painted) portraits in the literature of various eras. She suggests that the text’s aim is to “coloniz[e] the image and giv[e] writing the dominance” (102) by obliterating the distinction between the written and the visual, and by attempting to assimilate the visual in the written.

Mitchell follows a similar line of thought, stating that:

Ekphrastic poetry is the genre in which texts encounter their own semiotic “others,” those rival, alien modes of representation called [...] “spatial” arts. [...] The ‘otherness’ of visual representation from the standpoint of textuality can be anything from a professional competition (the *paragone* of poet and painter) to a relation of political, disciplinary, or cultural domination in which the ‘self’ is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject, while the ‘other’ is projected as a passive, seen, and (usually) silent object. (*Picture* 156-7)

Mitchells likens the otherness of ekphrasis to the otherness assigned to “blackness” in racial discourses, white being the color of the invisible and unmarked while black is “what can be *seen* (and therefore named)” (162; author’s emphasis). In this somewhat radical reading, ekphrasis expresses our fear of “merging with others” and the ekphrastic process is “a working through” of the self/other dialectic (163).

For Heffernan, Meltzer, and Mitchell, ekphrasis entails a power struggle between the active written word (the temporal and dynamic flow of words) and the passive image (the still, fixed, and paralyzing picture). Heffernan proposes that this is even a gendered conflict between “a male narrative striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space” (1) and the power of the female image, “both alluring and threatening” (2). This idea of a gendered conflict will be very useful for me in the sense that my corpus of texts takes this tension to an extreme by making the female body the center of
the representational problem and epitomizing (in Balzac and Zola especially) painting in the form of a powerful woman represented on canvas.

This *paragonal* relationship serves to explain the term “politics of ekphrasis” I use in the title of this dissertation. It will apply both to the way the power of the (female) image is cast at the thematic level in the triangular relationship between artist, model, and painting; and at the semiotic level in the tension between the verbal and the visual in the text. In Zola for instance, this political, *paragonal* aspect will be quite explicit as ekphrasis becomes a militant tool used to prove the demise of the Impressionist school.

What about the “poetics of ekphrasis?” It is important to remember that concurrent with the *paragone* is the notion of the “sister arts,” embodied in Horace’s formula “ut pictura poesis,” which always ran concurrent with the notion of the *paragone*. Andrew S. Becker, in “Contest or Concert?,” seeks to counter the critical trend that focuses almost exclusively on the *paragone* in the context of ekphrasis at the expense of the idea of fraternity. Such *paragonal* readings often ignore the “appreciative, respectful—even deferential—yet confident response to an image, actual or imagined” (2) that literature has offered. For Becker, “the visual and verbal arts can be considered in a complementary relation, in concert not contest” (3). This will be the case with Balzac’s “Chef-d’œuvre inconnu” and the Goncourts’ *Manette Salomon* where writing emulates painting not in order to subjugate it but rather, as Becker puts it, in order to complement it. In this instance, painting coexists with writing thematically and aesthetically.
EKPHRASIS AND DESCRIPTION

Before going deeper into this coexistence, fraternal or paragonal, we still need to establish what ekphrasis does in a text. A term that recurs in the various definitions we have seen is that of “description.” Critics, however, tend to immediately put a disclaimer on their association of ekphrasis and description, arguing that ekphrasis is slightly different and that the very term “description” is unstable anyway. Critics usually call upon the authority of Gérard Genette in order to explain what a description is and does. Webb and Heffernan for instance mention the difficulty of setting clear boundaries, following Genette’s own disclaimer that “pure description” and “pure narration” do not exist and that the two constantly overlap. Heffernan summarizes Genette’s distinction as follows: “narration delivers the ‘pure process’ of dramatic temporality while description suspends time, spreads the narrative ‘in space,’ and thus serves as ‘a mere auxiliary of narrative,’ as ‘the ever-necessary, ever-submissive, never emancipated slave’” (5).14 Genette’s rhetoric brings us back to Krieger’s presuppositions and by using the term “slave,” pushes the paragone to yet another extreme. Heffernan is quick to point out, however, that ekphrasis is “anything but submissive. It is the unruly antagonist of narrative, the ornamental digression that refuses to be merely ornamental” (5). Ekphrasis thus opposes resistance to its verbal “host,” refusing to abide by the rules it sets for its presence. As an ornament, it disrupts the boundaries between the verbal and the visual and helps call into question what a description is and what it does.

Kidébi Varga proposes an intriguing definition of ekphrasis and its function; according to him, ekphrasis forms “an exact description, meant, to a certain degree, to

evoke and substitute for the painting itself” (qtd in Yacobi “Pictorial” 608). What does one mean by “an exact description”? “Exact” is a vague but binding adjective that locks ekphrasis in an ethics of representation and assigns it the difficult task of describing, in highly precise, accurate, and faithful terms a referent that might not even exist (as is the case of notional ekphrases). The second part of Kidébi Varga’s statement is equally interesting: “to evoke and substitute for the painting itself.” This brings us back to the idea of substitution but it frames it in even more absolute terms. Kibèdi Varga falls into the trap of the impossible mimetic impulse that ekphrasis denounces as illusionary.

If one concedes, however, that, as Heffernan puts it, ekphrasis “often looks like a form of description” (5), one can then ask the question: what does/can ekphrasis describe? Becker suggests that one common assumption is to believe that ekphrasis should describe visible, depictable, surface features of the work of art—its appearance only. There should be no illusion, delusion, or θέλξις [enchantment] in the ecphrasis [sic]. Then the difficulty: if a description seems to be describing features that are not easily imaginable as surface phenomena, to be describing motives, reactions, telling a story in response to an image, then it must be doing something other than description. The conclusion is to assume that, where there is this difference, there must be a (nearly) juridical demonstration of the superiority of verbal over visual mimesis. This is when we hear that a description is “going beyond” the work of visual art. If some aspect of the description is not (imaginably or actually) present on the (imagined or actual) image, then the description is said to go beyond the visual image, and even to outdo that image. (6-7)

In other words, one must accept not “to repress ekphrastic versatility, in the face of its actual manifestations as well as its potentials, both ‘protean’” (Yacobi “Pictorial” 619). Ekphrasis cannot stick to “pure description” since it does not exist nor can it stick to pure mimesis since it is an illusion. Moreover, as Becker suggests, what ekphrasis does accomplish should not always be judged in terms of the paragone and the superiority of the verbal medium over the visual. By assuming that ekphrasis goes beyond and outdoes
the image, one also represses the story-telling power of an image and the range of emotions and reactions it can elicits in its viewers. As Ruth Webb pointed out in the case of Greek ekphrases, the emphasis was not on the subject matter, which could be anything, but rather on the reaction it drew out in the listener. As a performance, ekphrasis is more concerned with the effect than with the referent (Webb 7).

What does, then, ekphrasis describe, if not the artwork? For Becker, ekphrasis describes “the experience of viewing,” and in that sense, it is “going with the work of art, responding to its stimulus” (8; author’s emphasis). Michael Riffaterre corroborates Becker’s idea when he states that:

On ne saurait définir l’ekphrasis littéraire comme une lecture, car ce qu’elle déchiffre en premier lieu, ce n’est pas le tableau, c’est celui qui le regarde. C’est l’interprétation du spectateur (de l’auteur) qui dicte la description, et non le contraire. Au lieu de copier le tableau […], l’ekphrasis l’imprègne et le colore d’une projection de l’écrivain, ou mieux du texte écrit, sur le texte visuel. Il n’y a pas imitation, mais intertextualité, interprétation du texte du peintre et de l’intertexte de l’écrivain. (221; my emphases)

Becker and Riffaterre thus manage to remove ekphrasis from the yoke of mimesis by reassigning its mission from describing the work of art to accounting for the reaction the work of art elicits in each individual. These reactions are channeled through the “interpretation” of the visual the ekphrastic writers propose and convey in a variety of ways. Kranz suggests that ekphrasis can be “descriptiv, panegyrisch, pejorativ, didaktisch, moralistisch, politisch, sozialkritisch, delektierend, [oder] amourös” (qtd in Clüver 57-8). 15 Kranz continues by offering different categories of ekphrasis: “Transposition, Suppletion, Assoziacion, Interpretation, Provokation [die Wirkung des Kunstwerks auf den Beschauer], Spiel, [und] Konkretisation” (qtd in Clüver 58). Kranz

15 Kranz works with the German tradition of ekphrastic poems, or Bildgedicht, as Clüver reports.
thus provides a wide range of functions for ekphrasis that free it from its usual equation with description and that allows for ekphrasis to “go beyond” the visual without entering into a *paragonal* reading of it.

A final category I would like to address regards the distinction Riffaterre draws between what he calls “l’ekphrasis critique” and “l’ekphrasis littéraire:”

L’ekphrasis critique formule des jugements de valeur nuancés, fondés sur des principes esthétiques explicites; elle condamne ou elle loue, elle veut former le goût de ses lecteurs. Par contre, l’ekphrasis littéraire veut qu’ils admirent: variété de l’encomium, elle est en fait un blason de l’œuvre picturale. L’ekphrasis critique a pour objets des œuvres d’art qui se suffisent à elles-mêmes et dont la valeur peut être indépendante du contexte. L’ekphrasis littéraire a pour objet ces mêmes œuvres en soi, mais aussi des œuvres d’art réelles ou imaginaires, enchâssées dans une œuvre littéraire, dans un roman par exemple. Elles font partie du décor, ou bien y jouent un rôle symbolique, ou encore y motivent les actes et les émotions des personnages. (212)

According to Riffaterre, critical ekphrasis must be based on the formal aspects of the artwork whereas literary ekphrasis, whose referent might be imaginary, is rather based on the *idea* of the artwork, or on what Yacobi has called “pictorial models” (599). The art novels of my corpus tend to blur the line between literature and art criticism so much so that the ekphrases they offer do cross the line drawn by Riffaterre between literary and critical ekphrasis. Indeed, as we shall see in detail in each chapter, these “literary” ekphrases address formal aspects of the artworks, comment on and judge the aesthetic behind them, and indeed try to influence the taste of the reader as far as the particular artwork and the artistic movement to which it belongs. (This is especially the case in Zola.) They are far from the “blason” Riffaterre depicts them to be and they usually do not force the reader’s admiration. They are, just like the texts to which they belong, a hybrid form between literature and art criticism.
EKPHRASIS AND THE EKPHRASTIC MODE OF WRITING

In “Pictorial Models,” Tamar Yacobi argues against the restrictive assumption under which most theories of ekphrasis operate, taking for granted the idea that ekphrasis refers to one unique work of art. She proposes instead that ekphrasis can take as a point of departure what she calls “a pictorial model,” that is, a corpus of works by one particular painter or artistic movement. This way of engaging with ekphrasis offers another possibility of freeing ekphrasis from the confines of the descriptive genre. Indeed, by not being tied to a specific artwork, they cannot act as the substitute for one or be “exact descriptions.” Rather, they are meant to respect (or counteract), emulate, and translate the salient features of a visual mode, which are then diffused in the narrative fabric of the text.

One example that comes to mind is Balzac’s short story “La Fille aux yeux d’or,” aptly dedicated to Delacroix. The story recounts the twisted love affair between Henri de Marsay, a modern Faust figure, and Paquita, a beautiful and exotic young woman, the captive mistress of the Marquise of San Réal, who is in fact Henri’s half-sister. Although it is set in Paris, the atmosphere of the short story is overwhelmingly that of the Orient, notably through the description and evocations of Paquita’s stifling living conditions, locked up in the harem-like apartment in which the Marquise jealously keeps her. Paquita is described from the onset as “l’original de la délibante peinture, appelée La Femme caressant sa chimère” (46), “ce chef-d’œuvre de la nature” (66), “ce chef-d’œuvre de la création” (83), that is, as an unusual art-like figure whose “yeux d’or” captivate and fascinate de Marsay. These numerous allusions to art are complemented by the underlying mode of writing of the text. Debarati Sanyal refers to Balzac’s novella as
“ekphrastic” (100) because of the way it emulates Delacroix’s aesthetics thematically and stylistically. Henry Majewski has studied what he has called the “intertext” with Delacroix in the novella, focusing, just like Sanyal, on the particular references to Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement (1834; Figure 4) and La Mort de Sardanapale (1828; Figure 5) as well as on the overall characteristics of Delacroix’s art. It is worth exploring Balzac’s novella further, as the text provides a fine example of what I understand by an ekphrastic mode of writing.

Majewski looks at several specific moments in the text, notably the boudoir episodes, that is, where the sensual encounters between Henri and Paquita occur and where she is murdered. Let us examine one passage:

La moitié du boudoir où se trouvait Henri décrivait une ligne circulaire mollement gracieuse, qui s’opposait à l’autre partie parfaitement carrée, au milieu de laquelle brillait une cheminée en marbre blanc et or. [...] Le fer-à-cheval était orné d’un véritable divan turc, c’est-à-dire un matelas posé par terre, mais un matelas large comme un lit, un divan de cinquante pieds de tour, en cachemire blanc, relevé par des bouffettes en soie noire et ponceau, disposées en losanges. [...] Ce boudoir était tendu d’une étoffe rouge, sur laquelle était posée une mousseline des Indes cannelée comme l’est une colonne corinthienne, par des tuyaux alternativement creux et ronds, arrêtés en haut et en bas dans une bande d’étoffe couleur ponceau sur laquelle étaient dessinées des arabesques noires. Sous la mousseline, le ponceau devenait rose, couleur amoureuse que répetaient les rideaux de la fenêtre qui étaient en mousseline des Indes doublée de taffetas rose, et ornés de franges ponceau mélangé de noir. [...] Le plafond, au milieu duquel pendait un lustre en vermeil mat, étincelait de blancheur, et la corniche était dorée. Le tapis ressemblait à un châle d’Orient, il en offrait les dessins et rappelait les poésies de la Perse, où des mains d’esclaves l’avaient travaillé. Les meubles étaient couverts en cachemire blanc, rehaussé par des agréments noirs et ponceau. [...] Les chatoiements de la tenture, dont la couleur changeait suivant la direction du regard, en devenant ou toute blanche, ou toute rose, s’accordaient avec les effets de la lumière qui s’infusait dans les diaphanes tuyaux de la mousseline, en produisant de nuageuses apparences. [...] Il y avait dans cette harmonie parfaite un concert de couleurs auquel l’âme répondait par des idées voluptueuses, indécises, flottantes. (81-2)
The passage moves along the room, emphasizing the dominating color scheme of the room, with the preeminence of white, gold, black, and reds—a color scheme especially reminiscent of Delacroix’s *Mort de Sardanapale*. Majewski notes that the repetition of color names functions “as if Balzac considered the repetition to constitute a series of ‘taches’ or brush strokes on the canvas” (374). In addition to the special attention paid to colors, light and shapes also play an important role in the passage. Balzac emphasizes which objects are illuminated by the light cast by the chandelier. The long passage ends with the idea that the harmony of colors in turn affects the soul and one’s feelings. For Majewski, this is a “scène-tableau” (374) that draws from its intertext with Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* in order to introduce the theme of “the exotic captive woman in a golden oriental setting” (375). In this passage, Balzac does not imitate, describe, or reproduce Delacroix’s paintings; rather, he uses the painter’s art as a pictorial model to inform and enrich his text thematically and aesthetically.

Moreover, Balzac’s “La Fille aux yeux d’or” thoroughly corresponds to Riffaterre’s definition of literary ekphrasis as “intertextualité, interprétation du texte du peintre et de l’intertexte de l’écrivain” (221). What Balzac offers us here is his own *interpretation* of and *reaction* to Delacroix’s general aesthetics. The above-cited description of the boudoir corresponds in turn with what I have called “an ekphrastic mode of writing.” This term applies to descriptive literary passages that view the object of the description through the lens of an artwork or pictorial model and give it a painterly
quality. The ekphrastic mode of writing tends to emulate techniques used in painting (Balzac’s repetition of colors as “taches” on the canvas for instance) and can also employ the terminology of the visual arts (as will be the case in the Goncourts in particular).

I thus limit my understanding of an ekphrastic mode of writing to descriptive literary passages that emulate the aesthetics and techniques of an artwork or pictorial model. I do not wish to say here that there is an equivalence between the two but rather that there is a strong analogy between the descriptive passage and the model to which it refers. I situate the notion of ekphrastic mode of writing in the inclusive category of pictorialist writings, that is, highly visual poetry (like Rimbaud’s) that does not necessarily have an intrinsic bond with the visual arts (i.e. that lacks a referent). In Pictorialist Poetics, David Scott investigates this broader category, under which I include ekphrasis and that he calls “transpositional,” using the French terminology of “transpositions d’art” as the term ekphrasis does not exist in the French language.

EKPHRASIS AND TRANSLATION

We have so far established what ekphrasis is and what it does—it is a literary device that usually, but not necessarily, discusses the aesthetic and formal qualities of a specific artwork or pictorial model and that relates the author’s experience of this artwork. We now need to address how ekphrasis operates, that is, to examine what happens when the written translates the visual.

Etymologically, the term “translation” comes from the Latin transferre which means to carry over, to bring over. A translation, then, is a dynamic operation implying a

16 This presupposes that the referent belongs to representational art; we shall see further on the difficulty literary ekphrasis encounters when it comes to nonfigurative forms of art.
movement from one place to another, be it two languages or two sign systems as in the case of ekphrasis. The OED indicates that “to translate” means “to explain, to paraphrase, to interpret,” making translation a subjective process, a personal recasting of an initial element. The OED adds that “to translate” is also “to change in form, appearance, or substance; to transmute; to transform, alter.” In this understanding of the term, translation can dramatically affect the source. In the scholarship on translation studies, translation has been considered as a “transformational process” in which “an interpretive transfer […] described as encoding and decoding, must occur so that the message ‘gets through’” (Steiner 29). Lawrence Venuti corroborates this idea, defining translation as “a process by which the chain of signifiers that constitutes the source-language text is replaced by a chain of signifiers in the target language which the translator provides on the strength of an interpretation” (17). Venuti’s definition insists on the idea of substitution (“replaced”), an idea that we have also seen as being a common assumption of the criticism on ekphrasis. The common denominators between Steiner and Venuti are, first, the idea that a translation is an interpretative act and second, the fact that it must convey the message of the source text (Venuti talks about making the source text “intelligible for the foreign reader” (18)). A translation is thus assigned a communicative task the same way as ekphrasis is commonly assigned a descriptive task.

But as Walter Benjamin convincingly asks in his seminal essay “The Task of the Translator,” “What does a literary work say? […] Something inessential” (15). Benjamin denies the importance of the communicative nature of the literary work dismissing it as
“inessential.”

On the other hand, he asks: “But do we not generally regard as the essential substance of a literary work what it contains in addition to information—as even a poor translation will admit—the unfathomable, the mysterious, the ‘poetic,’ something that a translator can reproduce only if he is also a poet?” (15) Benjamin’s formulation is rather vague and touches on what is sometimes alluded to as “the spirit” or “the aura” of an artwork, that is, its least palpable characteristics but paradoxically, its fundamental ones. The task of the translator is to seize this “unseizable” in order to produce a good translation but this “poetic” aspect is also the point of resistance of the translational process.

I believe that what Benjamin identifies as the core of the literary work, “the poetic,” also lies at the core of the visual artwork. This brings us back to Becker’s idea of an ekphrasis “going beyond” the visual source. If an ekphrasis only evokes the formal, surface aspects of a painting, does it not transmit the inessential aspect of it? Mitchell provides this amusing anecdote about a visit to the Museum of Modern Art with his thirteen year-old son. Stopping in front of Kasimir Malevich’s *Painterly Realism—Boy with Knapsack—Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension* (1915; Figure 6), his son wittily tells him, “I suppose you’re going to tell me how great and full of significance this one is, too” (Picture 223) and argues that he “could say everything there is to say about it in one sentence. […] There is a small tilted red square below a larger black square” (225). Looking at the picture, while Mitchell’s son indeed gives a decent initial formal and surface description of the painting, what does he actually say about it? Benjamin would

17 Benjamin begins his essay controversially by also dismissing the importance of the audience: “No poem is intended for a reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener” (15). This comes at odds with my understanding of ekphrasis which is fundamentally intended for an audience. However, Benjamin’s overall understanding of translation remains useful for our purposes.
argue that he says something inessential, for the significance of the painting lies elsewhere, in “the poetic,” in what resists rapid surface description.

EKPHRASIS AND INTERSEMIOTIC TRANSLATION

The term “intersemiotic translation” was coined by Roman Jakobson in his essay “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation.” Jakobson draws a distinction between what he calls “intralingual translation, or rewording,” that is, paraphrase, “interlingual translation,” which implies two languages, and “intersemiotic translation or transmutation,” that is, “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of nonverbal sign systems” (129; author’s emphases). We will here accept this last term as working the other way around, that is, to paraphrase the formula, “an interpretation of nonverbal signs by means of a verbal sign system.” In his essay, Jakobson is concerned mostly with the first two forms of translation but scholarship on ekphrasis has appropriated and worked with the third category (Brînzeu and Clüver).

If the intrinsic difference between languages (both linguistic and cultural) complicates the ekphrastic process, where does the difficulty lie in the case of ekphrasis? Mitchell dismisses the common assumption according to which images and words do different things. For him, this idea is the result of a confusion between medium and meaning in the sense that “from the semantic point of view, from the standpoint of referring, expressing intentions and producing effects in a viewer/listener, there is no essential difference between texts and images and thus no gap between media to be overcome by any special ekphrastic strategies” (160; author’s emphasis). As he bluntly
puts it, there is no grammatical difference between the description of an artwork and that of a kumquat.

In the same vein, for Clüver, the difficulty is not of a linguistic nature but rather of a literary nature. He explains that “to transpose a painting into a verbal text is to reconstitute its meaning by creating a sign that draws on the codes and conventions of a literary (and not merely a linguistic) system equivalent to the pictorial system operative in the painting (61). Clüver’s definition raises several questions: first, he re-centers the goal of ekphrasis as the reconstitution of a meaning. As we have already mentioned, this meaning, however, is contingent upon the interpretation of the translator. On a more problematic level is Clüver’s idea of “equivalence.” Although he acknowledges that “visual texts do not serve as substitutes for the original” (56), he still seeks and identifies equivalence as being the main criteria for ekphrasis. Under this assumption, if the equivalence must reside in the codes and conventions of the source and target texts, can a Romantic painting be translated into a Realist ekphrasis? Or to push to the extreme, by a postmodern poem? I believe it can, for ekphrasis describes an experience first and foremost and is therefore necessarily filtered by the codes and conventions within which the ekphrastic writer works and which are not necessarily those of the painting.18

Clüver operates under a more restrictive idea of translation than I do. For me, all ekphrases are translations whereas for him, some ekphrastic poems are not because their relation to the visual source is too minimal. Clüver requires that certain correspondences be present before it can be established that the ekphrasis is also a translation: a “correspondence in the manner of representation,” reflected in the writer’s selection of

18 We will see, however that Clüver’s idea is true in the context of our texts.
the elements to include from the visual in the ekphrasis and how much information to provide about them (their size, place on the canvas, etc). The second correspondence revolves around the “correspondence between the signifiers as such,” and the third correspondence refers to “the ways in which […] the material aspect of the texts may be seen to relate to each other” (83). Clüver therefore establishes a repertoire of elements that ekphrasis needs to address for it to be translational, that is, a concrete basis on which to compare the visual source and its ekphrastic text. As we already mentioned, a comparison is viable when the source is known but it becomes problematic in the case of notional ekphrases. How then are these correspondences meant to be established? Instead of portraying ekphrasis as a superimposition on the visual source, one can imagine it as touching it tangentially (I here use the image Benjamin uses for translations).19 The connection is essential even though it touches only at one specific point, and it does not bind every aspect of the ekphrastic process to the original visual source. In that scheme, the link between ekphrasis and its visual source becomes a point of friction, where the terms of the relation are constantly being negotiated.

Finally, the last aspect of intersemiotic translation that Clüver mentions and that is useful for our purposes is the fact that for him, ekphrastic texts are always read as texts about text making that show us possibilities and limitations inherent in the two sign systems, alert us to the signifying power of syntactical and other structural devices available in each, and make us aware of differences in aesthetic codes and in sociocodes, especially with regard to conventions governing depiction and description. (70)

19 “Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity, a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux.” (Benjamin 22)
In other words, Clüver reminds us of the profoundly self-reflexive quality of ekphrastic texts and of the fact that, through ekphrasis, language experiments with itself and its limits along with the limits of the visual.

**EKPHRASIS AND THE PAINTING IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ART NOVEL**

How do all these considerations—ekphrasis and mimesis, ekphrasis and description, ekphrasis and translation—apply in the context of the art novel? I should like to now to study the ekphrastic practice in this particular context.

Henry James’s “The Madonna of the Future” (1875) epitomizes several of the elements we shall encounter with the three art novels of our corpus. James’s short story focuses on the character of Theobald, an American painter self-exiled in Florence, Italy, whose goal is to produce a Madonna in the style of Raphael’s *Madonna of the Chair* (1512-1514; Figure 7). Theobald, who has been working on this painting for twenty years, is at once fascinated and paralyzed by Serafina, the once “young and fresh and virginal” (166) woman who inspired it and from whom he hopes to create his Madonna. Theobald’s young friend, anonymously called H---, freshly arrived from the United States, acts as the catalyst of Theobald’s disillusion, revealing to him that Serafina is no longer the young woman he blindly believes her to be. The American “artistic” society of Florence, led by Mrs. Coventry, marginalizes Theobald, portraying him as deluded and deceitful, and its members become weary of waiting for Theobald’s self-proclaimed masterpiece.

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20 The parallels between James’s “The Madonna of the Future” and Balzac’s “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu” are numerous and, as we shall see, James directly alludes to Balzac’s tale in his own short story.
When H--- first meets Theobald, the latter explains that he is still in the incubation period of his painting—“I’m at work night and day. I’ve undertaken a creation! I am always adding a thought to my conception” (147; author’s emphasis). When H--- asks him if he has been productive in Florence, given that he finds inspiration everywhere in the city, Theobald replies:

Not in the vulgar sense! [...] I have chosen never to manifest myself by imperfection. The good in every performance I have reabsorbed into the generative force of new creations; the bad—there’s always plenty of that—I have religiously destroyed. (148)

Theobald thus seems rather lucid about his work, being able to assess and select what he deems worthy to remain. This is, however, a rather ambiguous response as he does not clearly state how many creations he has been able to produce.

The two paintings we know of by Theobald are antithetical in nature: one painting depicting Serafina’s dying son, referred to as the Bambino painting, painted in the manner of a Correggio. The other is a portrait of Mrs. Coventry, which we know only through her words: “If you could have seen the horrible creature he made of me, you would admit that even a woman with no more vanity than will tie her bonnet straight must have cooled off then. The man didn’t know the very alphabet of drawing!” (157) One can assume that Mrs. Coventry found her portrait unflattering and probably lacking resemblance. Through the expression “alphabet of drawing,” Mrs. Coventry questions Theobald’s basic skills. However, we know, because he had already painted the Bambino, that Theobald possesses the ability to paint. Interestingly, Mrs. Coventry tells H--- that were one to visit Theobald’s studio, “one would find something very like the picture in

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21 In L’Œuvre, some of the portraits made by Claude in order to make money are refused by the clients because of a lack of resemblance.
that tale of Balzac’s,—a mere mass of incoherent scratches and daubs, a jumble of dead paint” (159). As will become evident in my chapter on Balzac’s “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu,” to which she here alludes, the ekphrasis of the painting as a “mass of incoherent scratches” recalls the misreading of the Balzacian master’s work. Frenhofer’s *Belle-Noiseuse* and Theobald’s portrait do not rely on “the alphabet of drawing” but rather seem to experiment with this alphabet in order to propose something radically different. Mrs. Coventry’s ekphrasis of the portrait and of Frenhofer’s painting (even though she bases the latter on the way it is described in Balzac’s text) uses the vocabulary of mimetic art to respond to a seemingly abstract attempt. The ekphrasis thus reflects Mrs. Coventry’s own misinterpretation of Theobald’s painting, the impossibility of her (mimetic) words to describe it, and the necessity to refer to a (fictional) pictorial model (Frenhofer’s) in order to make herself understood.

When H--- reveals to Theobald that Serafina no longer is the youthful perfect model for a Madonna, the painter decides to finish his canvas nonetheless, claiming, tapping his forehead, that “after all, I have it here” (167; author’s emphasis). Theobald, who is the prisoner of the image he has created of Serafina, which blinds his vision, must rely on his inner eye (as opposed to the mediation of an earthly model) in order to achieve his work.22 Theobald’s canvas, however, remains blank, prompting the characters in the texts, and the critics of the short story, to categorize him as a failure. H-- proposes the following account: Theobald’s painting is “a mere dead blank, cracked and discolored by time,” (175) “an empty canvas” (176). As for Theobald, he refers to it as a

22 When explaining his admiration for Raphael’s *Madonna of the Chair* to H---, Theobald argues that surely, Raphael did have a model but that mostly, “the painter’s idea has taken wings” and that “no lovely human outline could charm it to vulgar fact” (151).
“bit of worm-eaten cloth,” (176) but also as “a promising foundation” (175). In other words, this blank canvas can be looked at as the failure of a man to translate his inner vision; or, in the context of modern abstract monochrome paintings, as an experiment with what constitutes a work of art; an experiment with the potential of the canvas rather than the failure of the blank. H--- seems to intuit this distinction, refusing to tell Mrs. Coventry what the painting looks like, first and foremost in order to protect the memory of his friend, but also because he may have partly understood the potential of this new, “future” type of art, which he knows will be misunderstood by the majority of people.

If one returns to the short ekphrasis of the canvas—“a mere dead blank, cracked and discolored by time”—one cannot help but note the analogy between Serafina’s aging and the aging canvas. Short of being a portrait in the accepted sense of the term, Theobald’s cracked and discolored canvas signifies, among other things, the passing of time as eloquently as the aged body of Serafina does. The “mere dead blank” of Theobald is as potent and meaningful as another Madonna of the Chair could have been. What is striking is that Theobald’s Bambino inscribes itself in the line of mimetic paintings with the explicit comparison to Correggio, whereas the two paintings centered on a female figure seem to depart completely from the mimetic principle. For me, this problematic female figure embodies the essence of the artwork that Theobald—and James through him—tries to lay on canvas and that emerges in an experimental fashion that thwarts the

23 It is striking to me that although Raphael seems to be Theobald’s main reference and the model he wishes to depart from for his new Madonna and Child, the Bambino painting is said to be in the vein of Correggio, as opposed to Raphael. Correggio is an interesting choice since he was an illusionistic painter. As defined by the *Oxford Companion to Western Art*, “illusionism specifically refers to painting dedicated to blurring the distinction between substantial and represented objects,” that is, an art strongly based on mimesis but which also points to the artificiality of the mimetic enterprise. Furthermore, Correggio seems to have had a palimpsest tendency in the sense that he did not hesitate to paint over already drawn canvases or to turn canvases upside down and start again (*Grove Art Online*). Correggio’s unconventional methods might explain James’s choice to compare the Bambino to one of his works rather than to Raphael’s.
ekphrastic process. The female figure is what Benjamin calls the “essential substance” or “the poetic,” that is, what resists the translation from the artist’s inner vision to the canvas but prompts experiments with new forms of art.

James establishes a clear dichotomy between mimesis and experimental, nonfigurative art by contrasting the character of Theobald with that of Serafina’s lover. The latter is a prolific sculptor who produces erotic statuettes of cats and monkeys that “were at once very perfect cats and monkeys and very natural men and women,” and whose “imitative quality was revolting” (173; my emphasis). The text thus opposes two extremes and playfully acknowledges the hyperbolic aspect of the mimetic practice.

James’s “Madonna of the Future” exemplifies the essential features of an art novel and the function and nature of ekphrasis in the art novel. Because this literary genre focuses on artists and their aesthetic struggles, the painting becomes part of the fiction, and is a fiction in and of itself, being developed in the same way as the characters in the text, with a genesis, a life, and sometimes a death. This fiction is enabled by the ekphrastic process that not only bears the formal qualities of the painting (but not always), and its theme, but that also carries a judgment on it, often in the form of several characters’ (mis)interpretation of it. At the heart of the painting and the ekphrastic process lies the elusive female figure, i.e. what the painter tries to seize and manages to seize using nonconventional art forms. However, this female figure escapes ekphrasis because of the discrepancy between the codes and conventions of the visual artwork and those of the text, to use Clüver’s explanation. However, despite this discrepancy, the “poetic” female figure emerges, forcing words to acknowledge the presence of this “anomaly.”
In James’s short story, the word “future” used in the title sheds a positive light on what might otherwise be considered Theobald’s failure to produce anything at all on his canvas. This final blank canvas, this “empty canvas” (176) or “promising foundation” (175) represents the “future” of the Madonna, a new form of Madonna. These various ekphrases each carry a different connotation and interpretation of the artwork. The idea of “a mere dead blank” or “empty canvas” reminds one of the anxiety of the blank page (or canvas) and the need to cover it up with words or paint (Frenhofer offers the other extreme from Theobald with his excessive layering of paint). However, as Theobald explains at the beginning of the short story, it is better in his view to destroy the “rubbish” (148) one can produce rather than cover for the sake of covering and producing. For Norman Bryson, Western painting is a painting of erasure: of the blank canvas through the brushwork, of the brushwork itself through a smoothing out of the surface in order to give the impression that the canvas is a natural mirror of the world (92). As Bryson puts it, “the brush traces obliteratively, as indelible effacement” (93) and it is this gesture, the gesture of the illusion of mimesis, that Theobald, albeit unconsciously, refuses to perform, leaving the canvas as a promise rather than filling it with “rubbish” (148).24

In “The Madonna of the Future,” where neither erasing nor covering occur in Theobald’s final painting, the cracks and the discoloration of the canvas constitute its intriguing and appealing aspect because of the way they affect its facture and draw the

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24 I do not wish to deny the fact that the blank canvas is also a sign of Theobald’s impotence, which is further symbolized in the text by Theobald’s chaste behavior toward Serafina (which again contrasts with her unchaste relationship with the prolific sculptor). I wish to underline, however, the potency of the experiment, however unconscious it might have been.
eye. They animate its “deadness,” signal its life and are the interstices where its meaning emerges; they are the elements that tell its story without fully revealing it. One might be left with an impression of lack after reading the short story, but not because of the lack of paint on the canvas; rather, because the ekphrasis describing it as a “mere dead blank, cracked and discolored by time” (175) frustrates and restricts our reading of it. The canvas is more than a dead blank, the discoloration and cracks are depictions of the passing of time. The derogatory qualifier “mere” and the adjective “dead” orient our interpretation of the painting as empty and dead. This is a fine example of the politics of ekphrasis and of the way it influences the reader’s interpretation by being an interpretation itself.

Ekphrasis assumes that an artwork has something to say, and that it means something, so that, in turn, it is able to say something about it and be meaningful as well. If what the painting says is not evident, (as in “The Madonna of the Future”), we are brought back to the idea denounced by Becker according to which the ekphrasis goes beyond the visual source. However, in James’s story, the ekphrasis does not go beyond, but is rather thrown off by the seeming lack of meaning and formal features. What “The Madonna of the Future” epitomizes, then is that there is a necessary and intrinsic part of silence in a canvas, a mystery that can never be fully unveiled. As François Lecercle explains in “Donner à ne pas voir,” paintings dissimulate and hide, as much as, if not more than they show; “La peinture, donc, ne saurait donner à voir sans cacher” (123).

Lecercle cites as examples two classical myths of painting: the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, and the contest between Apelles and Protogenes. Both are worth
reviewing at length as they will serve as a transition to the individual chapters and summarize the main points of my theoretical framing of the ekphrastic process.

According to the legend, Zeuxis and Parrhasius enter a contest to determine which is the most skillful artist. Zeuxis paints such a perfect bunch of grapes that birds are fooled and come to peck at the canvas so as to eat the fruits. When Parrhasius brings his creation to Zeuxis, the latter asks him to open the veil so he can see the painting only to realize that the veil is the painting. Zeuxis acknowledges the superiority of Parrhasius for if he was able to fool birds, Parrhasius was able to fool him. Lecercle summarizes as follows the “morale” of the legend:

On a donc à faire à deux types de ruse. La première, chez Zeuxis, est primaire, simplement mimétique: elle confond la copie et l’original. A cette ruse mimétique, qu’il conserve (le linge pris pour un vrai rideau), Parrhasius ajoute une ruse théorique: l’objet de la peinture n’est pas de reproduire le réel mais de piéger le désir. D’un côté, c’est seulement l’objet qui est en cause (on donne le faux pour le vrai). De l’autre, c’est le désir même qui est atteint: rien ne viendra jamais combler le manque de ce qu’on ne connaîtra pas. Le chef-d’œuvre est dans la confrontation aux limites mêmes du désir, à son impossible satisfaction. […] L’anecdote dit que, loin de montrer, la peinture apprend à faire son deuil du visible, qu’elle est moins de l’ordre de l’ostension que du deuil symbolique. (126)

What painting does not show but makes explicit is what desire is after, and can never obtain: full knowledge and full vision.

The second myth Lecercle relays concerns Apelles and Protogenes: Apelles pays a visit to Protogenes in Rhodes in order to meet the master whose works he knows and admires by reputation but not by sight. In the absence of Protogenes, Apelles draws a line on a plank as a token of his presence and skill. Upon seeing the line, with which he is very much impressed, Protogenes identifies the visitor as Apelles and draws another,
finer line to identify himself to Apelles. Upon the latter’s return, Protogenes’s maid shows her master’s line to Apelles, who,

rougissant d’être surpassé, avec une troisième couleur [...] refendit encore les deux lignes par une autre qui ne laissait place à rien de plus fin. [...] [Cette planche] ne contenait rien sur sa vaste surface que des lignes qui échappaient à la vue; au milieu de beaucoup d’ouvrages remarquables, elle paraissait vide, mais par cela même, elle attirait le regard et devint plus célèbre que tout autre morceau. (qtd in Lecercle 132)

The emptiness of this drawing, just like the emptiness of Theobald’s canvas, is what draws the desire to see and what brings it fame. Even though the three lines “échappaient à la vue,” defied visibility and thus participated in its emptiness (in its “rien”), the ekphrasis does not refer to the plank as a “mere dead plank with three colorful lines.” On the contrary, it stresses its seeming emptiness as the strength of the artwork, as what draws desire and the eye.

Furthermore, as Lecercle notes, the object of this contest no longer is a painting but a line, that is, the fundamental and minimal component of a figure, the alphabet of drawing. For Lecercle, the fact that these lines escape vision finds an explanation in the idea that “la peinture a pour vocation de disparaître, de laisser le spectateur pantois devant un spectacle qui, ostensiblement, se dérobe et se refuse, comme si elle appelait irrésistiblement un œil masochiste, qui ne prendrait son plaisir que dans la frustration” (128-9). The performance of painting is thus necessarily one of frustration; a frustration that can either be exacerbated or alleviated by ekphrasis but that remains, situated in the play between “le donner à voir” and “le donner à ne pas voir.”

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25 In “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu,” Poussin’s name appears for the first time as he signs a drawing he has just made copying Porbus’s painting; drawing thus constitutes a form of identification.
Lecercle concludes from these two stories that “l’histoire de la peinture occidentale est hantée par le voile de Parrhasius, mais on aurait du mal à retracer la fortune picturale de la ligne d’Apelle—qui a jamais peuplé ses toiles de lignes invisibles? Le chef-d’œuvre d’Apelle a le mérite d’aller jusqu’au bout—de penser la peinture à partir de sa mort” (131). Perhaps Lecercle underestimates the number of Apelles’ avatars: James’s Theobald and the cracks on his canvas is but one and the fictional painters of the art novels of my corpus certainly offer variations on invisible, colorful lines.

What Lecercle’s article stresses, and which will be the crux of Balzac’s “Chef-d’œuvre inconnu,” the Goncourts’ Manette Salomon, and Zola’s L’Œuvre are the questions of desire, frustration, visibility and invisibility as well as issues of life and death that underlie the paintings and that ekphrasis seeks to address. The tension between the mimetic veil of Parrhasius and the nonfigurative (invisible) lines of Apelles can be read as symbolic of the tension that reigns in the final paintings by Frenhofer, Coriolis, and Claude. While these paintings seem to give too much to see—too many layers of paint, an exaggeration of colors, an overbearing female figure—it is what they hide, “ce que ces peintures donnent à ne pas voir,” to paraphrase Lecercle, that will complicate the practice of ekphrasis in these texts.
Chapter Two: “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu,” Palimpsest, and Anamorphosis

René Magritte’s painting *Tentative de l’impossible* (1928; 8) offers a fine illustration of the premise of Balzac’s tale “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu” (1837)\(^{26}\)—namely, the impossible attempt to create life through painting. In a bare hallway that gives no indication of being a painter’s studio—there are no paintings on the wall, no sketches of other works, no easel—the artist, his brush in one hand and his color palette in the other, is working on his creation. A nude woman whose whole body has been created, save one arm, is standing, one leg slightly bent as though ready to begin walking as soon as she is complete. Her shadow on the floor leaves no doubt that she is a three-dimensional creature. It is difficult, however, to assess whether she is alive: her white complexion reminds one of the ivory of a statue—thus bringing to mind Pygmalion’s Galatea—the emptiness of her gaze and her lack of expression seem to suggest that she has yet to come to life, and that perhaps she never will. Facing her is (the image of) the artist who bears a striking resemblance to his creation: his white complexion, thick eyebrows, thin reddish lips, long straight nose, empty gaze, and a same expressionless

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\(^{26}\) It is difficult to give a precise date for “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu” insofar as Balzac revised it several times throughout the years. The first version appeared in *L’artiste* in 1831, as a pastiche of Hoffman’s “La leçon de violon” (1831). The text emphasized mostly the love story between Poussin and Gillette and the struggle between art and love. It was then published again that same year in *Romans et Contes philosophiques* with some modifications, mainly Poussin’s abrupt revelation to Frenhofer of his failure in *La Belle-Noisèuse*. In 1837, it appeared as part of *Etudes philosophiques* and the focus clearly becomes Frenhofer’s fate; the scene in which Frenhofer revises Porbus’s painting *Marie Égyptienne* is added, and the reflections on art and aesthetics are fleshed out. I will thus retain the year 1837 because I believe it contains the main aspects of the story. Two later versions were published in 1845 in the Furne edition of *La Comédie humaine* and in *Le Provincial à Paris* in 1847, the former adding the dedication “A un lord” at the beginning as well as the date 1832, the latter changing the title to “Gillette” (a major change no subsequent editor ever followed), revising the sentence “Cet adieu glaça les deux peintres” to “Cet adieu les glaça” (which grammatically can include Gillette), and eliminating the reference to Catherine Lescaut as a courtesan. (For more details and analyses on the textual changes, see Paulson “Pour une analyse dynamique de la variation textuelle: *Le Chef-d’œuvre* trop connu”).
face mirror the facial features of the woman. This visual echo reminds us that both are creations on the canvas we are looking at.

The incongruity of the painting lies in the fact that, in the created space of the canvas, the figure of the artist seems to have created a woman literally out of thin air and paint, doing away with (some of) the instruments of painting: the easel and the canvas. The colors appearing on his palette are the ones that compose the canvas: mostly whites (for the woman’s body and the artist’s shirt), browns (for the hair, the wall, and the artist’s suit) and reddish (the floor, some patches on the wall, the woman’s breasts). It is as though the artist had created not only this woman but also the setting and himself—a demiurge like figure who invents the world and himself; the woman does not come out of his rib but rather out of his brush and paint.

Magritte’s reenactment of the Pygmalion myth, a century after Balzac’s tale, stresses the resilience of this artistic aspiration. Despite the radically different styles of Magritte and Balzac and the equally different means of their respective fictional painters for achieving their ambition, Magritte’s artist and Balzac’s Frenhofer pursue a similar enterprise. They both seek to create life in the form of a woman. They both use the apparatus of painting (brush and paint, and as far as Frenhofer is concerned, the easel and the canvas also) but produce life, or life-likeness, rather than art. Indeed, in their demiurge attempt (tentative), it seems to me that the overarching ambition is to make art disappear, to make it so real (and here Magritte’s artist and Frenhofer differ as to their conception of the real) that it may no longer qualify as art.

But let us start from the beginning. Set in seventeenth-century France, “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu” introduces a trio of painters representing the various stages of an
artist’s life and career: the young Nicolas Poussin (inspired by the historical figure) “néophyte, […] barbouilleur d’instinct” (27) who has just arrived in Paris; the successful artist Porbus (modeled after the real seventeenth-century painter Pourbus); and the old master Frenhofer—a fictional figure. The short story draws on the artistic awakening of young Poussin whose meeting with Frenhofer and Porbus opens up his hopes of becoming a great painter and enables him to both prove his talent (he is asked to copy one of Porbus’s works) and start learning as he is exposed both to Porbus’s and Frenhofer’s theories of art. Poussin holds one of the keys of the story: his devoted mistress and occasional model, Gillette. Gillette is a young woman of perfect beauty who becomes exchanged for the opportunity to see Frenhofer’s mysterious masterpiece, *La Belle-Noiseuse*.²⁷

Frenhofer, an eccentric painter who has had the privilege of being the Flemish painter Mabuse’s only student, has been working on his painting, *La Belle-Noiseuse*, for ten years.²⁸ Frenhofer claims he has created life on canvas in the form of a woman he calls Catherine Lescault, whom he adores and treats as if she were his wife, much like Pygmalion with Galatea. Frenhofer refers to her as “ma créature, mon épouse” (42) and casts himself as her “père, amant et Dieu” (43) while calling her “mon idôle” (43). He refuses to let anyone see her lest she be desecrated by “[les] froids regards et [les] stupides critiques des imbéciles” (43). Unlike Pygmalion, Frenhofer does not pray to the gods for them to transform his creation; rather, he acts on it himself, and his struggle lies

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²⁷ This title, *La Belle-Noiseuse*, disappears from the text in the 1847 edition. “Noiseuse” is an interesting word that does not appear in any dictionary but that probably stems from the noun “noise,” that is, “querelle.” Belting offers as a possible translation of “Belle-Noiseuse” “argumentative beauty” (125).
²⁸ Mabuse, or Jan Gossaert, was a sixteenth-century Flemish court painter who is usually credited for bringing the Italian Renaissance style to the North.
in his attempt to instill the spark of life in Catherine, to forego the artifice of art (as in Magritte’s painting), and make his creation come to life.

Balzac’s tale pits love against art and affirms their incompatibility for the couples Poussin-Gillette and Frenhofer-Catherine: the artist must choose between them. To explain his refusal to show his creation, Frenhofer declares “je suis plus amant encore que je ne suis peintre” (43) while Poussin echoes the old master when he tells his mistress Gillette in a moment of devotion to their love “Je ne suis pas peintre, je suis amoureux. Périssent et l’art et tous ses secrets!” (39) Eventually, for both painters, art wins over love. Despite Gillette’s protest and his own hesitation, Poussin, moved by the idea of knowing the intriguing master’s secret, sacrifices his lover to his art. By the same token, Frenhofer, seeking an earthly woman with whom to compare his Catherine Lescault, agrees to show her to Poussin in exchange for Gillette. In this exchange of “femme pour femme” (44) as Porbus calls it—actually live woman for painted woman—Catherine wins in the eyes of Frenhofer, who declares her perfect compared to Poussin’s mistress. When Catherine is finally unveiled to Porbus and Poussin, the two artists are baffled by what they see: “des couleurs confusément amassées et contenues par une multitude de lignes bizarres qui forment une muraille de peinture” (49). They finally are able to discern “le bout d’un pied nu […] un pied délicieux, un pied vivant!” (49) The expected woman figure is in fact nothing but the image of a foot amidst a chaos of colors and lines.

29 It was a common assumption in the nineteenth century that love could interfere with the creative potential of an artist.
30 Much has been written about the idea of the exchange of women and the circulation of women in the text; see in particular Bernard, “La problématique de ‘l’échange’ dans ‘Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu’ de Balzac.”
THE PAINTER’S STUDIO: THE LOCUS OF CREATION AND A PERSONAL VISION

We are ushered into the story through the character of Nicolas Poussin, who, hesitant to knock on Porbus’s door, is let in under the false impression that he has accompanied the master Frenhofer who has also just arrived. Through Poussin’s eyes, the text provides two back to back masterful descriptions: the portrait of Frenhofer and the description of Porbus’s studio. These are the first instances of what I have called the ekphrastic mode of writing whereby painting doubles as writing. For the critics Went-Daoust and Berg, these passages enact the rivalry between painting and literature and posit the superiority of the latter over the former as Frenhofer’s theories come to fruition not in Porbus’s Marie Egyptienne or the old master’s La Belle-Noiseuse but rather through Balzac’s words. It is worth here quoting Frenhofer’s portrayal at length:

Imaginez un front chauve, bombé, proéminent, retombant en saillie sur un petit nez écrasé, retroussé du bout comme celui de Rabelais ou de Socrate; une bouche rieuse et ridée, un menton court, fièrement relevé, garni d’une barbe grise taillée en pointe, des yeux vert de mer, ternis en apparence par l’âge, mais qui, par le contraste du blanc nacré dans lequel flottait la prunelle, devaient parfois jeter des regards magnétiques au fort de la colère ou de l’enthousiasme. Le visage était d’ailleurs singulièrement flétri par les fatigues de l’âge, et plus encore par ces pensées qui creusent également l’âme et le corps. Les yeux n’avaient plus de cils, et à peine voyait-on quelques traces de sourcils au-dessus de leurs arcades saillantes. Mettez cette tête sur un corps fluet et débile, entoure-là d’une dentelle étincelante de blancheur et travaillée comme une truelle à poisson, jetez sur le pourpoint noir du vieillard une lourde chaîne d’or, et vous aurez une image imparfaite de ce personnage auquel le jour faible de l’escalier prêtait encore une couleur fantastique. Vous eussiez dit une toile d’atmosphère que s’est appropriée ce grand peintre. (19-20; my emphasis)

“Imaginez” immediately sets the tone for a visual description in the sense that we are asked by the narrator to paint a mental image of the old master. The first part of the
passage delineates the contours of Frenhofer’s face, detailing specific facial features and combining physical traits with psychological ones—“une bouche rieuse et ridée,” the green eyes that must cast “des regards magnétiques au fort de la colère ou de l’enthousiasme.” The portrayal thus informs us of both the physical and the psychological aspect of the sitter. The imperative verbs that punctuate the text—“Imaginez,” “Mettez,” “entourez,” “jetez”—seem to give the recipe for drawing a truthful image of Frenhofer and constitute the first lesson in painting of the text.

Moreover, Balzac uses sparse notes of color to enliven his portrait: a touch of green (“vert de mer”), a few touches of white (“blanc nacré” and “étincelante de blancheur”), as well as some black (“le pourpoint noir” brightened up by the gold chain and the diffuse light of day). This assortment of colors contributes to the dark atmosphere of the painting and is reminiscent of works by Rembrandt. Through his use of light and color, Balzac is able to highlight certain aspects of the master and to direct the reader’s eye the way a painting does. In her study of “l’écriture picturale” in the tale, Yvette Went-Daoust comments: “le narrateur s’empare du métalangage de la peinture pour décrire un personnage et procède comme s’il œuvrait sur une toile. Il en modèle les contours, joue avec la couleur, un peu comme Frenhofer lui-même détaille et corrige le tableau de Porbus” (53).

The last sentence of the passage—“Vous eussiez dit une toile de Rembrandt marchant silencieusement et sans cadre dans la noire atmosphère que s’est appropriée ce grand peintre” (20)—brings this portrait to life through the hypothetical “eussiez dit” and the detail “sans cadre.” Art has been liberated from the constraints of the frame, and the constraints of art, as Frenhofer is able to walk freely, frameless. As Went-Daoust
contends, “Rembrandt sert de caution picturale à la description” (55), unifying it and stamping it, as it were, with a recognizable style. I would suggest that Rembrandt also serves as a backdrop for the description of Porbus’s studio that immediately follows that the portrait of Frenhofer. 31 One particular Rembrandt picture comes to mind, not for its content—which would rather apply to Frenhofer’s portrayal—but for its technique.

In *The Philosopher in Meditation* (1632; Figure 9), the philosopher, an old man sitting at his desk but away from his open books, appears to be in deep meditation. His face matches the description of Frenhofer: a “front chauve, bombé, proéminent” and a white pointed beard reinforce the wisdom that emanates from his image. Balzac’s assessment of Frenhofer’s face as “flétri par les fatigues de l’âge et plus encore par ces pensées qui creusent également l’âme et le corps” (19) could very well apply to Rembrandt’s philosopher. The similarity stops here, however, as Rembrandt’s old man lacks the diabolical quality of the Balzacian artist. The philosopher’s desk is situated on the left-hand side of the painting, underneath an arch window from which springs the first and major source of light in the canvas. This light illuminates the philosopher’s face and lets us see the ascending spiral staircase that unwinds at the center of the canvas and that might symbolize the meanderings of thought and the upward process of meditation. The light does not reach the depth of the staircase or the front of the room to the left and the spectator is confronted with masses of black paint that obscure the atmosphere of the canvas. At the right-hand corner is an old woman stirring a fire; the fire is barely within the limits of the canvas and gives enough light to make the woman’s face visible. In other

31 There are quite a few studio paintings by seventeenth-century painters that also echo Balzac’s depiction of Porbus’s atelier: Michiel van Musscher’s *The Painter’s Studio* (1629), Gerrit Dou’s *Painter in his Studio* (1647), or Frans van Mieris’s *The Painter’s Studio* (1659).
words, what is not illuminated by the light of the window or by the light of the fire remains in the dark for the viewer.

_The Philosopher in Meditation_ sheds light on the ekphrastic quality of Balzac’s description of Porbus’s studio. After being greeted by Porbus who “s’inclina respectueusement” to let the old master and Poussin in, the description reads like a _tableau:_

Un vitrage ouvert dans la voûte éclairait l’atelier de maître Porbus. Concentré sur une toile accrochée au chevalet, et qui n’était encore touchée que de trois ou quatre traits blancs, le jour n’atteignait pas jusqu’aux noires profondeurs des angles de cette vaste pièce; mais quelques reflets égarés allumaient dans cette ombre rousse une paillette argentée au ventre d’une cuirasse de reître suspendue à la muraille, rayaient d’un brusque sillon de lumière la corniche sculptée et cirée d’un antique dressoir chargé de vaisselles curieuses, où piquaient de points éclatants la trame grenue de quelques vieux rideaux de brocart d’or, aux grands plis cassés, jetés là comme modèle. (20-21)

Guided by the light coming from the roof window, the “quelques reflets égarés” cast rays of brightness on selected objects: the Reiter’s corselet, the antique sideboard loaded with rare plates, the gold brocaded curtains—all of them objects which testify to the richness of Porbus’s studio. Just as in Rembrandt’s painting, what the light does not reach is kept in darkness. Balzac’s otherwise omniscient narrator limits his description to what can be seen. Balzac’s use of evocative verbs—”allumaient,” “rayaient,” “piquaient de points éclatants”—as well as the profusion of colors emulate the way painting operates through careful positioning of light and colorful elements; it also conveys the geometrical characteristics of a picture because it mentions the “angles” of the room, the reflections of light that “rayaient d’un brusque sillon de lumière,” the cornice of the sideboard and as such act as convergence lines for the viewer’s eye. Of course, it must be noted that just as Frenhofer’s portrayal was seen from Poussin’s perspective, Porbus’s studio is also seen
from the young artist’s perspective, who, although he is a neophyte, could be said to project his artistic point of view on the world.  

The studio is first and foremost indicative of the kind of painter Porbus is, that is, an academic painter, relying on the (idealized) reproduction of a well chosen set of models. This idea is reinforced by the end of the description:

Des écorchés de plâtre, des fragments et des torses de déesses antiques, amoureusement polis par les baisers des siècles, jonchaient les tablettes et les consoles. D’innombrables ébauches, des études aux trois crayons, à la sanguine ou à la plume, couvraient les murs jusqu’au plafond. Des boîtes à couleurs, des bouteilles d’huile et d’essence, des escabeaux renversés ne laissaient qu’un étroit chemin pour arriver sous l’auréole que projetait la haute verrière, dont les rayons tombaient à plein sur la pâle figure de Porbus et sur le crâne d’ivoire de l’homme singulier. (21)

The description has come here full circle: just as the light coming from the roof window highlighted specific objects in the room, the path these littered objects form brings us back to Porbus. Indeed, the latter, who greeted us at the beginning of the passage, is here joined by Frenhofer as both characters become the focus of the light that takes the shape of an “auréole” above their heads.

Moreover, the rare objects of the previous passage are complemented here by an abundance of artifacts, from plaster casts to sketches and color boxes; Porbus’s studio seems literally *covered* from floor to ceiling. The nature of these artifacts follows academic protocol and shows Porbus’s reliance on a carefully orchestrated and staged reality—whether artistic or real. Besides, as Went-Daoust suggests, the objects that compose Porbus’s studio evoke death: they are old (“antique dressoir”), rare (“vaisselles curieuses,” “cuirasse de reître”), and inert (“des torses de déesses antiques”). Went-Daoust concludes that this typically academic studio, which Poussin admires greatly,

32 This way of seeing the world in no way reflects the real Poussin’s way of painting, however.
stands at the antipode of Frenhofer’s thoughts on art as Porbus embodies “l’académisme sclérosé que le vieillard condamne” (57). As we shall see later, what Frenhofer condemns in Porbus’s masterpiece *Marie Egyptienne* is the very fact of its stillness and lack of movement: he reports that the saint seems stifled, “collée au fond de la toile” and that she “ne saurait se retourner, ni changer de position” (22). On the other hand, Balzac’s description is anything but motionless; on the contrary, he follows the movement of light and builds convergence lines through the rays of light and the path formed by the littered artifacts that lead to the two artist figures. Balzac’s ekphrastic mode of writing here provides a dynamic description rather than one that completely stalls the text; it guides the reader’s eye the way a painting’s composition and use of light and dark guide the beholder’s eyes.

Porbus’s studio is characterized by chaos (“des escabeaux renversés”) and excess: excess of objects and excess of art, or rather of the materiality, of the tools of art—the brushes, palettes, easels, as well as the props (the brocaded curtains that serve as backdrops for instance). This immoderation contrasts with the description of Porbus’s work in progress which “n’était encore touchée que de trois ou quatre traits *blancs*” (20; my emphasis). It is as though Porbus’s “jouissances,” to use the term he will employ for Frenhofer, lay outside of the canvas, in the realm of the studio, in the materiality of the world rather than in art itself. As will become clear later, for Frenhofer, these *jouissances* occur on canvas.

Frenhofer’s studio remains a mystery until the very end of the tale since Porbus and Poussin gain access to it only after Frenhofer has agreed to show his *Belle-Noiseuse*. The text remains elusive about it and does not offer as detailed a description as that of
Porbus’s atelier. Through Poussin and Porbus’s impatient eyes, we find ourselves in “un vaste atelier couvert de poussière, où tout était en désordre, où ils virent ça et là des tableaux accrochés aux murs” (47). Unlike Porbus’s studio, Frenhofer’s is covered with dust rather than things and although it is untidy, excess is not a word that can be applied to it.

Earlier in the tale, however, Frenhofer invites Poussin and Porbus to his house, which is described as “une belle maison de bois […] dont les ornements, le heurtoir, les encadrements de croisée, les arabesques, émerveillèrent Poussin” (30). Frenhofer’s house thus already, from the outside, bears the marks of art and is intriguing for Poussin in a way that Porbus’s dwelling was not. We are suddenly propelled inside the house as though in a haze, following Poussin’s overwhelming sense of wonder and marvel. There is no detailed description of the interior of the room which seems as intriguing as the exterior of the house as Poussin notes the presence of “merveilles entassées dans cette salle” (31). Poussin focuses on two artworks in particular: Mabuse’s Adam (probably after his Adam and Eve (c. 1525; Figure 10) and a woman’s portrait Poussin first mistakes for a Giorgione but that the old master reveals to be “un de [s]es premiers barbouillages” (31). The presence of Mabuse’s Adam is of course not fortuitous, nor is the fact that Balzac chose to ignore the Eve portion of the real Mabuse’s work: in “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu,” the only painter who can pretend to re-create the first woman is Frenhofer. As for most of the works presented in the text, it is their monetary or exchange value that is first cited: “C’était l’Adam que fit Mabuse pour sortir de prison où ses
créanciers le retinrent si longtemps” (30). We are not treated to a full description of the painting, but Frenhofer’s comments address some of its aesthetic aspects:

Il y a de la vie, dit-il, mon pauvre maître s’y est surpassé; mais il manquait encore un peu de vérité dans le fond de la toile. L’homme est bien vivant, il se lève et va venir à nous. Mais l’air, le ciel, le vent que nous respirons, voyons et sentons, n’y sont pas. Puis il n’y a encore là qu’un homme! Or le seul homme qui soit immédiatement sorti des mains de Dieu, devait avoir quelque chose de divin qui manque. (31)

For Frenhofer, it is not enough to produce life in the form of a human being—the sense of life must also be present in the ‘reality’ surrounding it “l’air, le ciel, le vent.” Human life must be accompanied by the re-creation of the world as well; in other words, the artist must be God. Frenhofer criticizes the fact that Mabuse has failed to instill the divine spark in his rendition of the first man. In his own endeavor to create a woman, it is this divine spark that the master wishes to capture. Frenhofer wants to surpass God: God has created man but had Eve come out of Adam’s rib. In other words, God created woman through the mediation of man; Pygmalion needed Venus’s help for Galatea to come to life. Frenhofer, on the other hand, wishes to bypass these intermediaries and become the first ever to create a woman unmediated, or without divine intervention.

FRENHOFER’S THEORIES

The first painting that is mentioned and that gives way to the first outburst of theory from Frenhofer as well as his first lesson in painting is Porbus’s *Marie Egyptienne* se disposant à payer le passage du bateau,” referred to as a “belle page” and a “chef-d’œuvre” (21). Despite the many pages devoted to this painting in the short story,  

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33 The first painting that appears in the text, Porbus’s *Marie Egyptienne*, is introduced the following way: “Ce chef-d’œuvre, destiné à Marie de Médicis, fut vendu par elle aux jours de sa misère” (21); Poussin’s copy of Porbus’s masterpiece is bought by Frenhofer who gives him “deux pieces d’or” (30).
we find ourselves at a loss to describe the masterpiece since there is no ekphrastic moment to bring it to life. The discourse of art—i.e. Frenhofer’s theories as well as his practice of art—has replaced art itself. In other words, the short story does not focus on images but rather on words. Painting has been instituted as a mode of writing, a “metalanguage” to use Went-Daoust’s term, but the intersemiotic translation between image and text, i.e. in the form of the ekphrasis of Porbus’s Marie Egyptienne or Frenhofer’s Belle-Noiseuse does not occur in the text. The biblical story of Mary provides the intertext for the work and thus defines its subject matter. The only detail we are entitled to concerns the shipman whose attitude of “indécision” fascinates the young Poussin. Just as Frenhofer claims, the Marie Egyptienne “ne vit pas,” neither on canvas nor in the text itself. We have the contours but not the colors, that element necessary to bring life into art, according to Frenhofer.

What does come alive are Frenhofer’s theories of art as he critiques Porbus’s Marie. As the old master explains, for the layman, Porbus’s work is a masterpiece but to the eyes of the initiated, it falls short with regard to the spark of life; or rather, it oscillates too much between life and death. Not only does Frenhofer here play the role of art critic but he also acts as an art teacher. He criticizes the work at several levels: the method, the execution, and the underlying principle. As far as the method is concerned, Frenhofer indicates that Porbus hesitated between two opposed schools: on the one hand, the Venetian school of Titian and Veronese with its emphasis on color; on the other hand, the

34 We shall return to this lack later in our analysis.
German school of Dürer and Holbein with its emphasis on line. 35 This hesitation leaves a mark on the execution of the painting, and as Frenhofer notes:

Ta figure n’est ni parfaitement dessinée, ni parfaitement peinte, et porte partout les traces de cette malheureuse indécision. Si tu ne te sentais pas assez fort pour fondre ensemble au feu de ton génie les deux manières rivales, il fallait opter franchement entre l’une ou l’autre, afin d’obtenir l’unité qui simule une des conditions de la vie. (23)

In other words, the look of indecision on the shipman’s face that Poussin so admires, is also a reflection of the indecision of method that pervades the painting as a whole. Frenhofer continues his demonstration pointing out which particular parts of the painting carry the pulse of life and which ones bear the stillness of death: “ici c’est une femme, là une statue, plus loin un cadavre” (22).

What Porbus has failed to provide for his creation, according to the old master, is a soul: “Tu n’as pu souffler qu’une portion de ton âme à ton œuvre chérie. Le flambeau de Prométhée s’est éteint plus d’une fois dans tes mains, et beaucoup d’endroits de ton tableau n’ont pas été touchés par la flamme céleste” (22-23). The artist must not only play God but also impart a portion of his own soul to his creation in order to succeed. Frenhofer proposes a deep reflection on the mimetic principle of art under which mode Porbus’s painting operates. When Frenhofer says: “Il ne suffit pas pour être un grand poète de savoir à fond la syntaxe et de ne pas faire de fautes de langue!” (22) and “La mission de l’art n’est pas de copier la nature mais de l’exprimer! Tu n’es pas un vil copiste, mais un poète!” (24), he means to say that representation should really mean recreation as opposed to reproduction. For him, it is not enough to draw after a live (female) model the anatomically correct figure of a woman, to embellish it according to

35 In the seventeenth century, the opposition is between the followers of Rubens (color, light, sensuality) and the followers of Poussin (line and reason).
the canons of beauty, and to give the illusion of perspective and depth through the pertinent use of light and dark. The alphabet of art must be supplemented by something less surface oriented, that is, by an ambition that looks into the depths of nature.

For this reason, Hubert Damisch qualifies Frenhofer’s conception of art as archéological in the sense that he digs past the surface, past the layers in order to find out the essence of life—what constitutes the soul of beings. This conception defies the long-established tradition of academic art of which Porbus is a representative and that, according to Frenhofer, lays too much emphasis on copying (the masters) to the detriment of re-creating (nature). Frenhofer argues that it is not necessary to copy in order to represent: one can “figur[er] le mouvement et la vie” without “copier exactement” (24).

Frenhofer defines the task of the artist as follows:

Nous avons à saisir l’esprit, l’âme, la physionomie des choses et des êtres. Les effets! Les effets! mais ils sont les accidents de la vie, et non la vie. Une main, puisque j’ai pris cet exemple, une main ne tient pas seulement au corps, elle exprime et continue une pensée qu’il faut saisir et rendre. Ni le peintre, ni le poète, ni le sculpteur ne doivent séparer l’effet de la cause qui sont invinciblement l’un dans l’autre! (24)

Frenhofer’s holistic approach thus strives to expose what pertains to the soul and spirit of both people and things.

Frenhofer’s archéological view of art further transpires in the vocabulary he uses:

Vous ne descendez pas assez dans l’intimité de la forme, vous ne la poursuivez pas avec assez d’amour et de persévérance dans ses détours et dans ses fuites. […] Toute figure est un monde, un portrait dont le modèle est apparu dans une vision sublime, teint de lumière, désigné par une voix intérieure, dépouillé par un doigt céleste qui a montré, dans le passé de toute une vie, les sources de l’expression. (25)

Frenhofer here underlines the detective work the artist must perform, much like an archeologist on an excavation site, in order to seize the elusive side of nature, that is,
form. According to him, form brings us back to “le passé de toute une vie” (25). Frenhofer is thus a philosopher of art who has studied the great masters in order to understand his own ambition. His studies did not bring him to copy the masters of the past, as pupils at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts were asked to do; rather, he explains: “j’ai étudié à fond les grands maîtres du coloris, j’ai analysé et soulevé couche par couche les tableaux de Titien” (33; my emphasis). Again, the archeological parallel is telling of the way Frenhofer’s mind operates through peeling and layering.

Interestingly, when it comes to the practice of art, Frenhofer implements a reverse method: that of layering as opposed to peeling off the layers. But at last, he has provided us with a valuable theoretical tool to study and analyze art, and his art in particular. His critique of Porbus’s Marie Egyptienne is a lesson in reading and interpreting that we, in turn, need to apply when considering his own works of art. In other words, Frenhofer sees artworks as palimpsests, or surfaces made up of superimposed layers of paint, that is, as exactly what they are. He warns Poussin while retouching Porbus’s Marie, “Personne ne nous sait gré de ce qui est dessous” (29) because for him, it is what is underneath that constitutes the essence of the work. It is noteworthy that no critic, except for Damisch, has ever commented on this sentence by Frenhofer while it is, I believe, essential in apprehending the kind of art Frenhofer conceptualizes and practices. In the same way as nowadays, conservators x-ray Da Vinci’s paintings in order to understand his technique, literary critics also need to investigate the “dessous de la peinture” of Frenhofer.

A final aspect of Frenhofer’s theories of art that is worth noting is his conception of “form” which lies at the heart of his reflections and which helps us understand his
parting ways with mimetic art. While explaining that the artist must express nature and not simply copy it, Frenhofer elucidates the ways to do so:

Vous ne descendez pas assez dans l’intimité de la forme, vous ne la poursuivez pas avec assez d’amour et de persévérance dans ses détours et dans ses fuites. La beauté est une chose sévère et difficile qui ne se laisse point atteindre ainsi; il faut attendre ses heures, l’épier, la presser et l’enlacer étroitement pour la forcer à se rendre. La forme est un Protée bien plus insaisissable et plus fertile en replis que le Protée de la fable; ce n’est qu’après de longs combats qu’on peut la contraindre à se montrer sous son véritable aspect; vous autres, vous vous contentez de la première apparence qu’elle vous livre, ou tout au plus, de la seconde, ou de la troisième. […] [La] grande supériorité [de Raphaël] vient du sens intime qui, chez lui, semble vouloir briser la forme. La forme est, dans ses figures, ce qu’elle est chez nous, un truchement pour se communiquer des idées, des sensations, une vaste poésie. Toute figure est un monde, un portrait dont le modèle est apparu dans une vision sublime, teint de lumière, désigné par une voix intérieure, dépouillé par un doigt céleste qui a montré, dans le passé de toute une vie, les sources de l’expression. (25)

This passage illustrates the concrete, violent, and physical struggle that the master experiences in the creative process. One needs to “épier, presser, enlacer étroitement, forcer, contraindre, briser [la forme]” in order to delve deeper into the secrets of life. Form is described as a world whose construction is of divine quality, “un doigt céleste,” dependent upon an inner experience (“désigné par une voix intérieure” and “apparu dans une vision sublime”). Form is also supposed to uncover the “sources de l’expression,” that is, to go back to a primitive, essential and perhaps performative form of expression, that of Genesis where God says and it becomes.

THE LESSON IN PAINTING: FRENHOFER’S TECHNIQUE

“Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu” provides us with the two sides of painting: theory and practice. After verbally critiquing Porbus’s masterpiece, Frenhofer continues on to actually retouch it. Frenhofer’s brief performance consists of little dabs here and there
applying glaze (“un petit glacis bleuâtre” 28), sheen (“le luisant satiné” 28) and patches of color (“quelques plaques de couleur” 29) in order to unify the overall tone, to give ardor to the Marie figure, and to create a sense of movement and pulse in the painting—”Regarde comme cette draperie voltige à présent” (28). Painting is portrayed as a particularly intense activity both verbally and physically. Onomatopoeic sounds “Paf, paf, paf!” and “Pon! Pon! Pon!” (29) accompany the “convulsions” and “petits mouvements si impatients, si saccadés” that characterize Frenhofer’s brushstrokes. The final product is “une peinture trempée de lumière” which leaves Poussin and Porbus “muets d’admiration” (29) as the master has managed to instill depth and life into the painting, creating the illusion that each element breathes and moves.

After this successful demonstration, Frenhofer tells his two companions: “Cela ne vaut pas encore ma Catherine Lescault, cependant on pourrait mettre son nom au bas d’une pareille œuvre. Oui, je la signerais, ajouta-t-il en se levant pour prendre un miroir dans lequel il la regarda” (29-30). He ‘threatens’ to sign the painting—the conditional suggests it may not happen—in a process of appropriation, without Porbus doing as much as complaining. Most importantly, he takes a mirror in order to look at his work. This gesture has also been overlooked by critics. Using a mirror was a technique Da Vinci employed when he painted and it was also recommended by Alberti as a way to assess one’s creation. What exactly does a mirror do? First, the mirror flips an image right to

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36 The jerkiness and convulsion of the brushwork adumbrate the “jouissances” Porbus notes on Frenhofer’s Belle-Noiseuse.

37 For more on the use of mirrors as an aid to painting and representations of mirrors in painting, cf. Mark Pendergast Mirror, Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection. Pendergast quotes Da Vinci saying: “When you wish to see whether the general effect of your picture corresponds with that of the object represented after nature, take a mirror and set it so that it reflects the actual thing…The mirror ought to be taken as a guide… If you know but well how to compose your picture, it will also seem a natural thing seen in a great mirror” (138). Alberti, in On Painting, also advises painters to use the mirror: “A good
left so that the reflection on the flat surface provides a different angle from which to view the original image. Although the mirror offers an exact reflection, it is also a distorted image in the sense that it reverses the order of things. It gives the illusion of exactness without being exact. Furthermore, the mirror achieves a quasi photographic fixing of an image in the sense that it seizes, if properly placed, the totality of the original image and reflects it in its entirety with equal emphasis on all of its details. It is thus different from a painting which necessarily focuses on and emphasizes specific elements.

Additionally, a mirror flattens an image, smoothing out any roughness or irregularity in the texture and surface of the canvas, again offering a new perspective and a different way of approaching the artwork. Frenhofer thus stages not only the production of the work of art—his performance on canvas through his brushwork—but also the act of viewing and perceiving. Through the mediation of the mirror, Frenhofer asks the question of how one sees the work of art rather than what one sees in the work of art and emphasizes perception rather than content. Through his final painting, he proposes a work of art that shocks, disrupts, upsets cognition and re-cognition and makes perception the focus of representation.

What Frenhofer has accomplished here with his lesson in painting is to appropriate Porbus’s work to himself and to bury Porbus’s masterpiece underneath layers of paint. Porbus’s Marie Egyptienne has now become a palimpsest, traces of which are still apparent underneath the patches of paint Frenhofer added. The original version of Porbus’s work survives through the sketch Poussin draws of it and that prompts

judge for you to know is the mirror. I do not know why painted things have so much grace in the mirror. It is marvelous how every weakness in a painting is so manifestly deformed in a mirror” (137). I do not know, however, to what extent mirrors were used in the creative process in the nineteenth-century.
Frenhofer’s “training session.” This drawing becomes the neophyte’s identity card since, in the same appropriating gesture as Frenhofer’s, Poussin signs it, thereby imprinting his name both on the work of art and in the text itself—this is how we learn his name. But Frenhofer immediately buys the drawing, re-appropriating the *Marie Egyptienne* for himself.

Porbus’s immediate reaction to Frenhofer is one of submission and awe but as soon as he can, he reveals to Poussin his real thoughts regarding Frenhofer’s genius:

[Frenhofer] est un homme passionné pour notre art, qui voit plus haut et plus loin que les autres peintres. Il a profondément médité sur les couleurs, sur la vérité absolue de la ligne, mais, à force de recherches, il est arrivé à douter de l’objet même de ses recherches. Dans ses moments de désespoir, il prétend que le dessin n’existe pas et qu’on ne peut rendre avec des traits que des figures géométriques; ce qui est trop absolu, puisque avec le trait et le noir, qui n’est pas une couleur, on peut faire une figure; ce qui prouve que notre art est, comme la nature, composé d’une infinité d’éléments; le dessin donne le squelette, la couleur est la vie, mais la vie sans le squelette est une chose plus incomplète que le squelette sans la vie. (36)

Porbus expresses a fundamental disagreement with Frenhofer’s theories: “la forme” and its rendering through color constitute the core of Frenhofer’s beliefs about painting whereas Porbus argues that color is a filling, an ornament, rather than a defining element. In opposition to Frenhofer’s quest to create life, Porbus’s art is marked by death. The old master says of the Marie figure that she seems to be stifling (28) and that her throat would be “froide comme du marbre” (22) if he were to touch it. Porbus himself uses the term “squelette” to talk about drawing and line while acknowledging that color is life. Whereas Frenhofer seems to focus on the painting as a whole, and to pay particular attention to the general movement of the image created, Porbus is more attached to details and he believes that in order to provide the most accurate rendition of nature, it is better to first give it its material concrete basis—the skeleton—rather than focus on its
‘soul,’ that is, color. As Frenhofer tells Porbus: “Tu n’as pu souffler qu’une portion de
ton âme à ton œuvre chérie” (22); which, in a way, was all Porbus was trying to
accomplish.

GILLETTE AND CATHERINE

Poussin’s unexpected encounter with the master who “était devenu, par une
transfiguration subite, l’art lui-même, l’art avec ses secrets, ses fougues et ses rêveries”
(35) energizes the young neophyte who, upon returning home, is hopeful for his own
ambition and talent. There is Gillette, his mistress, awaiting him, sitting next to the only
window in the room, unframed then, not a work of art, not contained, perhaps “sans
cadre” like Frenhofer. The description of Gillette starts with her soul:

une de ces âmes nobles et généreuses qui viennent souffrir près d’un grand
homme, en épousent les misères et s’efforcent de comprendre leurs
caprices; fortes pour la misère et l’amour, comme d’autres sont intrépides
à porter le luxe, à faire parader leur insensibilité. Le sourire errant sur les
lèvres de Gillette dorait ce grenier et rivalisait avec l’éclat du ciel. Le
soleil ne brillait pas toujours, tandis qu’elle était toujours là, recueillie
dans sa passion, attachée à son bonheur, à sa souffrance, consolant le
génie qui débordait dans l’amour avant de s’emparer de l’art. (38)

Gillette is thus characterized by her ability to suffer and share another’s suffering,
as well as her capacity to support the genius of man and the constant oscillation between
art and love. To help her lover, she has become, albeit reluctantly, his model and after a
heated discussion, she agrees to pose for another artist. Gillette knows full well, however,
that this constitutes a point of no return in her relationship with the young painter: he will
cease to love her once she has been seen by another man; and her love for him will fade
because his proposal has made him “moins estimable” in her eyes (40). In trying to
convince Gillette to pose for another, Poussin tells her as a sort of reassurance: “Il ne
pourra voir que la femme en toi” (40). When Frenhofer, upon seeing Gillette’s beauty, finally agrees to unveil *La Belle-Noiseuse* to Poussin and Porbus, Gillette asks “Pour lui, […] ne suis-je donc pas plus qu’une femme?” (46) But, to put it bluntly, what else could he see in her? What else is Gillette? What else can she be? She was selected because she fit Frenhofer’s requirements: she is a beauty with a soul, a potential match for his Catherine. In accordance, the master does not look at her for what she is but rather in terms of what she can reveal to him about Catherine, and how she can confirm the superiority of his creation over the natural perfection Gillette embodies.

Went-Daoust argues that Balzac’s description of Gillette, when she is first introduced to Frenhofer, is an example of a “description picturale:”

Gillette était là, dans l’attitude naïve et simple d’une jeune Géorgienne innocente et peureuse, ravie et présentée à ses brigands à quelque marchand d’esclaves. Une pudique rougeur colorait son visage, elle baissait les yeux, ses mains étaient pendantes à ses côtés, ses forces semblaient l’abandonner, et des larmes protestaient contre la violence faite à sa pudeur. (45)

Went-Daoust also notes that “Gillette n’existe que par la grâce de l’écriture balzacienne” (60). Indeed Gillette has been transformed into an image here: she is not herself but rather the image of beauty embodied in the traits of a young Georgian girl.38 She has been fixed in the pose, her arms flanking her body and almost hopeless. However, her portrait differs greatly from that of Frenhofer at the beginning of the tale or from the detailed description of Porbus’s studio. Whereas we saw the influence of Rembrandt in the technique *used* by Balzac in these two previous descriptions, Gillette’s portrait bears none of these

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38 In *The Invention of the Model*, Susan Waller explains how theories of race, notably Buffon’s, were central to the stereotypes applied to models. Buffon tied beauty to skin color and classified Western Europeans as the top of racial ladder (80). The reference of Gillette as a Georgian girl can thus be read as a strong statement on her beauty.
characteristics (and is thus not an example of ekphrastic mode of writing, since there is no pictorial model, but rather an instance of what Went-Daoust calls “écriture picturale”). She is not described physically other than to explain her posture of resignation, humiliation, and hopelessness.\(^{39}\) The “description picturale,” allied with the ekphrastic mode of writing in the text thus transform reality to present it as though it were a painting whereas the actual paintings in the text remain mysteries.

This is the last time we, as readers, see Gillette as she turns from the image of a young Georgian to an almost silent voice throughout the rest of the story. Gillette resists words; aside from her perfection—Porbus and Poussin both use this word to describe her (40, 44)—she is indescribable, unpaintable, untranslatable: words need the mediation of an image (the Georgian girl) to evoke her whereas she herself does not find a mediating agent. Her posing sessions for Poussin are not chronicled, nor is her experience with Frenhofer. Her body is a mystery, just like the Marie Egyptienne. In the rest of the story, she exists only as the sobbing voice who finally interrupts the three artists’ contemplation of Catherine: “Poussin entendit les pleurs de Gillette, oubliée dans un coin” (51). Gillette is disembodied because she is, just like her rival Catherine, the unspeakable, both on canvas and through words. Her description as a young Georgian is an approximation of her, a doubling of her into someone she is not, the distortion of her image. She is, in the story, no more than a “woman” of infinite beauty with a great soul. For the only flesh and blood woman of the story, the flesh and the blood are what is missing. Whereas we can believe that Frenhofer’s work on Porbus’s Marie Egyptienne has made her more lively,

\(^{39}\) This might be a reference to the depiction of the modest model in Diderot’s Encyclopédie (in the article on “Le dessein”), where the female nude model is portrayed standing, hiding her face with her hands in a gesture of shame.
with the pulse finally beating through her throat, this same liveliness is lacking in Gillette who is, despite her central role, barely a character in the story.

What of Gillette’s rival, Catherine Lescault? Contrary to Poussin’s mistress, Catherine has a last name, and her status seems more legitimate and better defined than that of the young woman. Indeed, Frenhofer refers to her as his wife and creature (42), and acts as though she were a real woman:

Frenhofer’s passion for his work has turned into an obsession whereby he cannot bear the idea of letting anyone see the painting which he has infused with a soul and animated with life. Catherine is here described as though she were the happy captive of the old man, a creature who reciprocates his love, commitment, and his desire to keep her hidden. He equates showing her with an act of prostitution. As Valazza notes, although Frenhofer has effectively been married to his Catherine for ten years, he attests to her virginity and to the fact that he never consummated their union (151). Frenhofer insists on the fact that a veil protects his happiness and that Catherine can only be shown “vêtue” (“Chef-d’œuvre” 42). This of course is reminiscent of the layers of paint that successfully
cover her but that do not, as they were intended to, shield her from “[les] froids regards et [les] stupides critiques des imbéciles” (43). It is as though Frenhofer already knew the incomprehension with which other eyes would look at Catherine.

So why, after arguing so vehemently that he will never show his “création” does Frenhofer change his mind? He tells Porbus that he is finally done and that the only thing he needs is to find a perfect “earthly” woman with whom to compare Catherine so as to pronounce her superiority over natural creation. Following is how he describes this ideal beauty:

Il m’a manqué de rencontrer jusqu’à présent une femme irréprochable, un corps dont les contours soient d’une beauté parfaite, et dont la carnation… Mais où est-elle vivante, dit-il en s’interrompant, cette introuvable Vénus des anciens, si souvent cherchée, et dont nous rencontrons à peine quelques beautés éparses? Oh! pour voir un moment, une seule fois, la nature divine complète, l’idéal enfin, je donnerais toute ma fortune, mais j’irai te chercher dans tes limbes, beauté céleste! Comme Orphée, je descendrai dans l’enfer de l’art pour en ramener la vie. (35)

Again, Frenhofer’s rhetoric is that of archeology, of finding the unlikely mortal equivalent of the ancient Greek ideal, Venus, on earth; what he calls “la nature divine complète.” It is the wholeness of the ideal, the search for a woman who would stand for beauty, who would be beauty as opposed to simply being beautiful. When Porbus introduces Gillette to Frenhofer, he tells the old master: “ne vaut-elle pas tous les chefs-d’œuvre du monde?” (45) Porbus thus promotes Gillette as being on par with or superior to art: her beauty, her soul included, is supposed to surpass art. Presented this way, she seems to be a match for Frenhofer’s creation. His initial reaction is to “tressailli[r]” (45) in front of the image Gillette presents, that of the young Georgian girl; however, Frenhofer already knows the result of this unfair ordeal: “Il semblait avoir de la coquetterie pour son semblant de femme, et jouir par avance du triomphe que la beauté
de sa vierge allait remporter sur celle d’une vraie jeune fille” (46; my emphasis). Let us note in passing that Gillette, being the mistress of Poussin and living with him does not entirely merit the title of “vraie jeune fille.” Perhaps though, this is where her question—"Pour lui […], ne suis-je donc pas plus qu’une femme?”—becomes pertinent: Poussin and Porbus see her as a work of art whereas Frenhofer sees her for what she is, a beautiful young woman. Frenhofer has stripped her of the artistic “aura” with which Poussin and Porbus had clothed her by considering her a masterpiece.

ANAMORPHOSIS AND REVELATION

What do we know exactly of Catherine before her unveiling? Because Frenhofer does not believe in the supremacy of line, he has blurred the contours of his creation and rather delineated them through “un nuage de demi-teintes blondes et chaudes qui fait que l’on ne saurait précisément poser le doigt sur la place où les contours se rencontrent avec les fonds” (33). In that sense, La Belle-Noiseuse seems to prefigure Monet’s experiments with light in Impression: Soleil levant (1872; Figure 11) or the Nymphéas series. On the other hand, in his search for an earthly woman who could fulfill his ideal beauty, he seeks someone whose “contours soient d’une beauté parfaite” (35).

Interestingly, whereas the formal content of the Marie Egyptienne was never evoked, Frenhofer describes his creation to the two painters who have not yet seen it:

Qui le verrait [le tableau], croirait apercevoir une femme couchée sur un lit de velours, sous des courtines. Près d’elle, un trépied d’or exhale des parfums. Tu serais tenté de prendre le gland des cordons qui retiennent les rideaux, et il te semblerait voir le sein de Catherine rendre le mouvement de sa respiration. (44)
The work itself has Baudelairian overtones with the synesthesia of the senses, where the visual (the woman laying on the bed and the breathing movement of her breast; the gold color) cohabits harmoniously with the sense of smell (“parfums”) and touch (“serais tenté de prendre”). This ekphrasis occurs through the filter of Frenhofer’s own words and vision. As I mentioned earlier, for Went-Daoust, Gillette “n’existe que par la grâce de l’écriture balzacienne” (60). One could argue that Catherine exists only in Frenhofer’s imagination, scopic field, and words. The use of the conditional—“verrait, croirait, serais tenté, semblerait”—allied with the verbs of perception show that what Frenhofer offers here is his subjective vision of the painting, what he interprets it to be, and what he effectively sees in/on it. He seems to be taken in by his own vision: whereas he has done away with the mimetic principle as the governing agent of his art—it used to be the guiding principle, as the image of the foot suggests—mimesis reappears as a symptom, a veil that masks his perception.

Max Milner argues that:

Le peintre et le sculpteur, ayant affaire avec le visible, paraissent plus dangereusement exposés non seulement à cette perte de contact avec le réel qui caractérise plus ou moins toutes les formes d’aliénation (l’écrivain et le musicien le sont encore davantage), mais à la tentation de mettre à la place de ce réel un réel autre, qui les absorbe et les hallucine; un réel à la fois semblable au premier, dont ils prétendent toujours copier les formes ou exprimer l’essence, et qui en diffère pourtant à tel point que le reste des hommes n’arrive pas à le faire entrer dans le système de signes qui fondent la lisibilité du monde. (5)

Frenhofer’s situation then, is that of a painter who has indeed replaced outside, ‘real’ reality, with his own man-made reality: he perceives as real a woman he has created thanks to a brush, a palette, and a canvas standing on an easel. And he is so absorbed by

40 Hans Belting sees this ekphrasis as a description of Ingres’s Grande Odalisque (Figure 20; 104).
this alternate reality that it makes him see what is not. But his hallucination is productive in the sense that his visionary way of painting has managed to produce this woman not just in his mind but also on his canvas, through an alien, “poetic” form.

I have already suggested that because of Frenhofer’s archeological conception of art and his gesture of layering the canvas, he has transformed Catherine into a palimpsest for this literal woman emerges fragmentarily in the fetishistic image of the perfect foot. This perfect foot is reminiscent of the fantasy of life on canvas and of the desire for meaning in an otherwise incomprehensible canvas. I would like now to propose that one can read La Belle-Noiseuse as an example of anamorphic painting. D’Alembert in L’Encyclopédie defines anamorphosis as follows: “se dit d’une projection monstrueuse, ou d’une représentation défigurée de quelque image, qui est faite sur un plan ou sur une surface courbe, et qui néanmoins à un certain point de vue paraît régulière et faite avec de justes proportions.” D’Alembert’s definition exemplifies the idea of anamorphosis as unnatural and as something that defies appearances, in the way that La Belle-Noiseuse does. Anamorphic paintings were usually produced in a courtly context, both as tricks and as means by which the artist could demonstrate his skill and mastery of perspective. They became more and more popular in the seventeenth-century, when our story takes place, and throughout the eighteenth century (Julian Bell) and were used mostly to hide either erotic images or images of death (Pendergast 143-44) and sometimes, religious revelations (Julian Bell). There are two kinds of anamorphic paintings: those which combine an anamorphic element with a traditional representation, and anamorphic paintings as a whole where the whole image is an anamorphosis.
Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (1533; Figure 12), one of the most well-known anamorphic paintings. It seems at first sight quite conventional: two men are standing in a room and resting on a console where various objects of knowledge—books and scientific instruments—are laying. At the bottom of the painting is a “strange object [that] remains undecipherable and disturbing” until one kneels and looks at the painting from the right angle (Kliger 284). Only then can the spectator see what this “stain,” to use Žižek’s term, is: a skull that stands as an allegory of *vanitas* (Kliger 284). The skull serves as a reminder of one’s mortality over one’s wealth and earthly possessions. The anamorphic element in a painting is usually the key to understanding the painting’s meaning. It acts as a *revelation*: to elucidate what the stain stands for is to find and disclose the truth of the painting. Kliger argues: “The need to know arises as a consequence of the disjunction and tension between linear and anamorphic perspectives, between apparent representational plenitude and a blatant flaw within it” (295).

Of course, there is no “plenitude” in Frenhofer’s painting as it does not use the rules of linear perspective and it is therefore harder to discern the flaw at first. But Poussin and Porbus’s attitudes in front of the canvas indicate that they are looking for the right angle from which to view it: “[ils] regardèrent si la lumière, en tombant d’aplomb sur la toile qu’il leur montrait, n’en neutralisait pas tous les effets; ils examinèrent alors la peinture en se mettant à droite, à gauche, de face, en se baissant et se levant tout à tour” (48). Interestingly, it is only when they get closer that the image of the foot is revealed.41

41 Interestingly, Frenhofer suggests that one needs to step back in order to appreciate the painting that would otherwise seem “cotonneux” whereas “à deux pas, tout se raffermit, s’arrête et se détache; le corps tourne, les formes deviennent saillantes” (33).
If the anamorphic stain, when it is finally revealed, is the truth of the painting, what seems to be the truth of *La Belle-Noiseuse*? According to Poussin and Porbus, the image of the foot reveals the presence of a live woman underneath the layers of paint and proves that Frenhofer did not lie to them or try to trick them as they believed at first. But unlike Holbein’s skull which gives immediate meaning and provides the “moral” of the painting, the image of the foot can only supply a glimpse, a fragment of the truth, as the rest of the canvas, as well as Catherine, continues to be hidden underneath all the layers of paint. The masterpiece will thus remain unknown, “le chef-d’œuvre inconnu,” as will Catherine. The real truth of the foot is that it posits a truth that will never be revealed.

Furthermore, as Žižek argues, the anamorphic stain is the dysfunctional element in the painting, what makes it uncanny, “the element that, when viewed straightforwardly, remains a meaningless stain, but which, as soon as we look at the picture from a precisely determined lateral perspective, all of a sudden acquires well-known contours” (90). In *La Belle-Noiseuse*, there is indeed a disconnect between the foot as the symptom of mimesis and the rest of the painting as a rejection of figurative art. It is nevertheless thanks to that image of the foot that Porbus and Poussin, as well as the reader, can begin to make sense of the painting. What the anamorphic reading reveals is that the mimetic element is the flaw, what should not have happened. It is what escaped the creative, transformational process that turned the female nude into an experiment with form. Frenhofer explains his experiment throughout the text but his two critics and interpreters relegate his voice, what he says of his painting—that it is a reclining nude figure—as background “noise,” just like Gillette’s cries at the end of the story.
Instead of Frenhofer’s words then, we are left with Poussin’s and Porbus’s interpretation:

‘Je ne vois là que des couleurs confusément amassées et contenues par une multitude de lignes bizarres qui forment une muraille de peinture.’ […]
En s’approchant, ils aperçurent dans un coin de la toile le bout d’un pied nu qui sortait de ce chaos de couleurs, de tons, de nuances indécises, espèce de brouillard sans forme; mais un pied délicieux, un pied vivant! Ils restèrent pétrifiés d’admiration devant ce fragment échappé à une incroyable, à une lente et progressive destruction. Ce pied apparaissait là comme le torse de quelque Vénus en marbre de Paros qui surgirait parmi les décombres d’une ville incendiée. (49)

The archeological implication is here even more explicit as the foot is likened to a Venus emerging from the ruins of a burnt city. This comparison is of course not fortuitous as it is probably the type of beauty Poussin and Porbus expected to find in Frenhofer’s promised *chef-d’œuvre*, that is, a perfected piece of reality with a classic reference. It is easier for Poussin and Porbus and for the critic in general—which they represent—to focus on this fragment of the painting and pinpoint it as the proof that Frenhofer is indeed a genius. The image of the foot, the anamorphic stain, means that for Balzac, what is important is what is underneath, what has been buried. And what has been buried is the perfect woman, “délicieuse, vivante” like this foot that belongs to her.

But Frenhofer’s reality proposes a different system of signs, a different encoding of life that plays with and makes use of the arbitrariness of the signifier-signified correspondence and establishes new possibilities for it. While Poussin and Porbus examine his painting, Frenhofer mistakes their silence for admiration and respect and he keeps interpreting the painting for them:

Vous êtes devant une femme et vous cherchez un tableau. Il y a tant de profondeur sur cette toile, l’air y est si vrai, que vous ne pouvez plus le distinguer de l’air qui nous environne. Où est l’art? perdu, disparu! Voilà les formes mêmes d’une jeune fille. N’ai-je pas bien saisi la couleur, le vif
de la ligne qui paraît terminer le corps? N'est-ce pas le même phénomène que nous présentent les objets qui sont dans l'atmosphère comme les poissons dans l'eau? Admirez comme les contours se détachent du fond? Ne semble-t-il pas que vous puissiez passer la main sur ce dos? [...] Mais elle a respiré, je crois! Ce sein, voyez? Ah! Qui ne voudrait l'adorer à genoux? Les chairs palpitent. Elle va se lever, attendez. (48)

To discard these words as pure hallucination is discrediting one possible reading of the painting that is contained in the text itself. Frenhofer provides his own continued interpretation of his abstract painting along with his own analysis of the technique he used. The disconnect is perhaps not between the painting and what it represents but rather between the painting and the words at Frenhofer’s disposal: his words are prisoners of the discourse of mimetic, figurative art whereas Poussin’s words—”des couleurs confusément amassées et contenues par une multitude de lignes bizarres qui forment une muraille de peinture” (49)—could apply to nonfigurative art. Critics often compare Frenhofer’s canvas with Jackson Pollock’s creations.

Pollock’s *Number 12* (1949; Figure 13) for instance is one of the numerous works by Pollock that are reminiscent of Frenhofer’s end product, minus the foot. *Number 12* offers an illustration of Pollock’s signature pouring and dripping techniques: patches of red and black paint are combined with yellow, grey, white and blue lines on a beige background. As Damisch states, in this painting:

*Le tracé lui-même disparaît et l’œil ne reconnaît plus qu’un jeu de taches aux boursouflures métalliques, qui suggère vaguement une forme écartelée. Tableau unique, en deçà de la peinture, et qui témoigne de l'hésitation du peintre, en même temps que de sa volonté de remonter toujours plus avant, à l’origine même du geste et de la rhétorique, à ce point à partir duquel il deviendrait possible de créer un langage neuf, fondé sur cette coïncidence parfaite du désir, du geste et du tracé.* (86)

Could this not apply to Frenhofer’s work? Damisch’s quote reveals that Pollock seems to have fulfilled Frenhofer’s dream of a painting without drawing as there is a free flow of
lines that are interconnected and interlaced and that do form shapes, although arbitrary ones.

One less common comparison drawn apropos of Frenhofer is with the Impressionist school.\textsuperscript{42} Poussin and Porbus’s ekphrasis of \textit{La Belle-Noiseuse} reminds one of the way that Impressionist paintings were apprehended at first by confused, hostile, or receptive critics. Frenhofer’s ambition to recreate movement, his special attention not only to the human figure but to its surroundings—”l’air, le ciel, le vent que nous respirons” (31) recall some of the positive reviews of the Impressionists. As Reutersvärd relates, “the impressionists were said to have captured in their pictures, ‘la mobilité de l’atmosphère,’ ‘les irisations de l’air ambiant,’ ‘le frémissement aérien,’ ‘la sensation du grand vent’” (274). Monet in particular was said by the philosopher Séailles to “[peindre] l’impalpable, l’atmosphère, ses fluidités, ses transparences” (qtd in Reutersvärd 274).

Frenhofer’s is indeed a painting of movement, and his criticism of Porbus’s \textit{Marie Egyptienne}, as we saw earlier, revolved around the lack of palpable movement in the canvas, and therefore its lack of life. Frenhofer tries to create movement and life through what seems to be “[un] chaos de couleurs, de tons, de nuances indécises, espèce de brouillard sans forme” (49) rather than through lines that clearly delineate the contours of a figure. Some of the hostile critics of Impressionism charged the new school with similar accusations. For Charles Bigot, Impressionist paintings were “un chaos miroitant de touches brutales” (qtd in Reutersvärd 273; my emphasis) and Huysmans evoked their “taches trémoussantes, points lumineux distribués \textit{sans cause}” (qtd in Reutersvärd 273; my emphasis). In response to the first Impressionist exhibition of 1874, Ernest Chesneau

\textsuperscript{42} I am grateful to Professor Brienen for having suggested this link.
writes: “A distance, dans ce frémissement de grandes ombres et de grandes lumières, on salue un chef-d’œuvre. Vous approchez, tout s’évanouit; il reste un chaos de râclures de palette indéchiffrable” (qtd in Reutersvärd 275; my emphases). Again, this is very close to Poussin and Porbus’s attitude and to the fact that one needs to look at the paintings from the right angle in order to appreciate them. Finally, in his review of the 1874 Impressionist exhibition, Emile Cardon mocks the Impressionists’ conception of line and form:

Cette école supprime deux choses: la ligne sans laquelle il est impossible de reproduire la forme d’un être animé ou d’une chose, et la couleur qui donne à la forme l’apparence de la réalité. Salissez de blanc et de noir les trois quarts d’une toile, frottez le reste de jaune, piquez au hasard des taches rouges et bleues, vous aurez une impression du printemps devant laquelle les adeptes tomberont en extase. Barbouillez de gris un panneau, flanquez au hasard et de travers quelques barres noires ou jaunes, et les illuminés, les voyants, vous diront:—Hein! comme cela donne bien l’impression du bois de Meudon. Quand il s’agit d’une figure humaine, c’est bien autre chose; le but n’est plus d’en rendre la forme, le modelé, l’expression, il suffit d’en rendre l’impression sans ligne arrêtée, sans couleur, sans ombre ni lumière; pour réaliser une théorie aussi extravagante, on tombe dans un gâchis insensé, fou, grotesque, sans précédents heureusement dans l’art, car c’est tout simplement la négation des règles les plus élémentaires du dessin et de la peinture. Les charbonnages d’un enfant ont une naïveté, une sincérité qui font sourire, les débauches de cette école écœurent ou révoltent. (Cardon La Presse; author’s emphasis)

Cardon’s critique could very well apply to Frenhofer’s theories about form. When Frenhofer says: “essaie de mouler la main de ta maîtresse et de la poser devant toi, tu trouveras un horrible cadavre sans aucune ressemblance, et tu seras forcé d’aller trouver le ciseau de l’homme qui, sans te la copier exactement, t’en figurera le mouvement et la vie” (24), he places himself in the category of Impressionists according to Cardon’s analysis. Frenhofer’s idea of “forme” does not respect the alphabet of drawing, as he
advocates not to content oneself with “la première apparence qu’elle vous livre” (25) and to rather “descend[re] […] dans l’intimité de la forme” (24-5).

The juxtaposition of Poussin and Porbus’s words and those of the critics of Impressionism reveals the similar impression created by Frenhofer’s Belle-Noiseuse and by Impressionist canvases. A main difference, however, is that most of the critics of Impressionism refer to landscape paintings (except for Cardon’s allusion to the lack of form and modeling in human figures43). It seems to me that Frenhofer has taken the Impressionist approach to landscape painting and applied it to a nude figure, blurring its contours, refusing to let the empiric form (the modelé) dictate the end result. I cannot say that Frenhofer offers an impression of Catherine Lescault the same way Monet offers an impression of the rising sun in Impression: Soleil levant. Frenhofer seems rather to want to “express” nature but what emerges on the surface of his canvas elicits the same words of confusion and incomprehension as his Impressionist counterparts.

Frenhofer, the Impressionists, and Jackson Pollock all experiment with ‘organized chaos’ and with the surface of the work, layering and superimposing paint through various techniques. In a way, Frenhofer should have said: “Personne ne nous sait gré de ce qui est dessus” because everybody “lui sait gré de ce qui est dessous.” A lot is said and speculated about this hidden perfect woman underneath but the layers of paint are usually interpreted as just that, layers of paint, even by critics who believe that Frenhofer’s work is not a failure but an anticipation of abstract art. I should like now to advance the idea that Frenhofer’s radically new way of painting is in response to the impossibility of

43 Chesneau might have had in mind the black dots of Monet’s Boulevard des Capucines for instance, that are meant to represent the passers-by. (We will study this painting in detail in Chapter Three).
representing woman, as an image on canvas, and by extension through words in Balzac’s text.

**FRENHOFER AND THE NUDE**

In *The Painting of Modern Life*, T.J. Clark argues that in the 1860s, the crisis of the nude was both an effect and a cause of the crisis of representation as a whole (128). Until then, the nude had been intended as “a picture for men to look at, in which Woman is constructed as an object of somebody else’s desire” (131). Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538; Figure 14) to take a classic example, presented to men’s eyes a courtesan on display in a staged performance of her sexuality: nothing is direct but rather everything is mediated. The courtesan’s sensuous gaze, her reclining and enticing pose, provide the signs of her offering herself in a contained, conventionalized way. The classic nude is erotically loaded without ever being interpreted as unseemly and the classical reference made it completely acceptable. Clark also notes that most often, male desire was present in the nude in the form of Eros or an animal like figure such as a faun, a satyr, or the little dog in the case of the *Venus of Urbino*. Starting with *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1863; Figure 15) and continuing with *Olympia* (1863; Figure 16), Edouard Manet breaks with these conventions to propose a radical reworking of the nude where the erotic becomes the sexual stripped of the apparatus of art. *Olympia* redefined the nude by offering a female figure with a straight non seductive gaze and an uncompromising attitude, but also by proposing a new manner in painting, to use Zola’s expression. Clark notes that Manet’s work on the *surface* of the painting, his exposing the materiality of art and revealing the “marquetry of paint” (138) combined with his radically new conception of
the nude are the marks of his modernity. He states: “The nude in its degenerating state was right about sexuality: sexual identity was nowhere but in the body; and it was not there as a structure or a set of attributes, but had to be figured as interference and excess, a tissue of oddities and inconclusiveness” (131).

Frenhofer’s “jouissances” on the painting can then also be attributed to his way of addressing the female nude and to his ambition to propose an even more radical way of representing it, one that does away with the body completely, deforming it in order to protect it from the male gaze and male desire in general. What Frenhofer paints is not the nude but naked flesh. Kenneth Clark draws a clear distinction between ‘nude’ and ‘naked;’ naked meaning deprived of clothes and nude meaning “the body clothed in art” (Nead 14). Frenhofer seems to be caught in between these two definitions. On the one hand, by applying layers of paint over what we can infer to be the image of a woman’s body, he responds to the classical definition of the nude as a body clothed in art. However, the abstract aspect of the painting immediately upsets this definition and renders it void. On the other hand, if, as the image of the foot seems to suggest, he had indeed managed to produce life on canvas; if indeed, as he contends, “l’art a disparu” from his painting, if art has come to permeate the real world—as in Magritte’s Tentative de l’impossible, although in a different way—then, we are left with a raw female body, with the naked, that is, that which is unrepresentable.

In “La Chair du Chef-d’œuvre inconnu,” Valazza suggests that La Belle-Noiseuse is not “de ‘ces belles robes de chair’ revêtant ‘de pâles fantômes coloriés’, telle la Marie Egyptienne de Porbus, mais de chair à vif, saisie de convulsions (celles du peintre se répercutant sur le tableau qu’il exécute). L’on songe de nouveau à la Raie de Chardin.
Voilà ce que l’œil ne saurait souffrir; pas chez une femme, du moins” (147; author’s emphasis). Chardin’s *La Raie* (1728; Figure 17) presents the viewer with an open, bloody fish at the center of the composition, its internal organs exposed, a cat to its left and kitchen utensils to its right, all this resting on a table to the exception of the fish hanging from a hook. Diderot’s ekphrasis of this painting is very pertinent for us:

*L’objet est dégoûtant; mais c’est la chair même du poisson. C’est la peau. C’est son sang; l’aspect même de la chose n’affecterait pas autrement. Monsieur Pierre, regardez bien ce morceau, quand vous irez à l’Académie, et apprenez, si vous pouvez, le secret de sauver par le talent le dégoût de certaines natures. On n’entend rien à cette magie. Ce sont *des couches épaisses de couleur*, appliquées les unes sur les autres, et dont l’effet *transpire du dessous en dessus*. D’autres fois on dirait que c’est une vapeur qu’on a soufflée sur la toile; ailleurs, une écume légère qu’on y a jetée. Rubens, Berghem, Greuze, Loutherbourg vous expliqueraient ce faire bien mieux que moi; tous en feront sentir l’effet à vos yeux. *Approchez-vous, tout se brouille, s’aplatis et disparaît. Eloignez-vous, tout se crée et se reproduit.* (“Salon de 1863” 195)

Diderot’s ekphrasis of Chardin’s *Raie* gives life to Frenhofer’s prescription that one must take a step back in order to fully apprehend the painting—Diderot’s words corroborate the fact that the spectator becomes the creator of the painting insofar as one’s movements produce its reality. It also adds a new dimension for interpreting the layers of paint that “*transpire[nt] du dessous en dessus.*”

Diderot acknowledges the “*dégoûtant*” subject matter of Chardin’s work but this is what life, or rather what death is: raw flesh, and save for the image of the perfect foot, Catherine Lescaut is buried, in a liminal state between life and death, on the canvas, underneath the layers of paint, prisoner of the frame, contained by the paint covering her, and unable (and perhaps unwilling) to escape. She is like Chardin’s *Raie*, her blood still flowing but confined within the limits of art; “*les chairs palpitent*” (48) but there is no
Venus to effectively bring her to life and free her from her artistic chains. As is, she is unrepresentable.

Frenhofer has thus found the solution to this impossible state of being: the covering and the layering envelop Catherine while leaving a stain that signals her presence (the image of the perfect foot) and it preserves her intimacy. Frenhofer, through creating life on canvas, has managed to produce a literal translation of the real; one that pushes mimesis to its extreme by replacing reality his own “fictional” reality instead of representing what is. The Balzacian master has juxtaposed an exterior reality recreated through a new system of signs that suggests and expresses reality in an abstract way but one that remains incomprehensible for the common man and even for as seasoned an artist as Porbus. The female body is the essential substance of the work of art, what resists translation both on canvas—the flesh must not be exposed—and in the text—the visual language; the ekphrastic mode that brings to life Porbus’s studio and Frenhofer’s character fail to give a concrete shape to the female body. Catherine is “the unfathomable, the mysterious, the ‘poetic’” (Benjamin 15).
Chapter Three: Manette Salomon and the Poetics of Ekphrasis

Vous possédez ce qui est plus fort que le style. Je veux dire le pittoresque. Vous y êtes passés maîtres. Vous y excellez et les âcretés de la jalousie vont safraniser le teint de Gautier, de Banville et de Saint-Victor, ces grands coloristes.
[…] vos vues d’ensemble, si complètes, si rapides et si saisissantes en leur poétique réalité, ce n’est pas du fond d’une écritoire que vous les tirez. La palette, non la plume, emprunte au soleil de si chauds rayons et produit de ces éblouissements.
Soyez donc les bienvenus, Messieurs, dans l’Elseneur des peintres en prose, des dessinateurs en vers et des littérateurs à l’eau-forte: Ut pictura poesis. (Duchesne Le Figaro 30 novembre 1867)⁴⁴

This, in essence, is Manette Salomon (1867). As Duchesne pertinently points out in his defense of the Goncourts’ novel, it is indeed a “galerie de tableaux” where art criticism, lengthy landscape descriptions, anecdotes, and analyses of social phenomena (“la blague” in Chapter Seven of the novel for instance), coexist with a narrative tracing the artistic and personal trajectory of two painters in particular: Naz de Coriolis and Anatole Bazoche. The Goncourts’ écriture artiste, to which Duchesne alludes under the name “le pittoresque” gives the impression that indeed, the brothers write with a brush rather than a pen. Duchesne also rightly underlines the importance of colors in the novel and the omnipresence of masterful landscape descriptions that contribute to the painterly quality of the novel.

Manette Salomon could have been subtitled, à la Stendhal, “Chronique de la vie artistique du dix-neuvième siècle.” It relates the life of various fictional painter figures:

⁴⁴ Quoted by Champeau in the “Dossier” for the Folio edition of Manette Salomon.
from the purely academic production of the successful Garnotelle, the poverty-stricken and Bohemian Anatole, the struggling aesthetics of Coriolis, and the solid work of Crescent, a representative of the emerging Barbizon school, *Manette Salomon* offers a complete look at the artistic landscape of the 1830s through the 1860s. The reader follows the protagonists from their early days at the Atelier Langibout, a bastion of academic life, through the political meanderings of the Prix de Rome contest, to their first exhibition at the annual Salon and the reception of their work by the public and the press of the time. Interspersed are fragments of theory regarding contemporary art and the ‘modern’ by Chassagnol, whose works remain unknown but whose words influence Coriolis’s artistic ambitions.

As for Manette Salomon, she is the Jewish model who crosses Coriolis’s path and leads to his personal downfall and artistic death—that is to say, his transformation into a commercial painter. Despite the title, Manette is a secondary character who appears only in the second half of the novel, and whom we get to know largely through the eyes of

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45 I am not interested here in reading *Manette Salomon* as a roman à clef. The correspondences between the fictional painters and real life artists have been established by many critics. In her notes to the Folio edition, Champeau reminds us of the identifications that have been made: Coriolis seems to be a mixture of Alexandre Decamps, Théodore Chassériau (also of Creole origin) and Eugène Delacroix; Chassagnol is based on Paul Chenavard; Garnotelle on Hippolyte Flandrin; and Crescent on Théodore Rousseau, Jean-François Millet, and Charles Jacque. Throughout *Manette Salomon*, the Goncourts allude to several of these real life artists in order to ground the novel in the artistic reality of the time. Chapter Three of the novel offers a critical panorama of the artistic milieu of the 1830s-40s, assessing the “désastreuse influence de la littérature sur la peinture” (93), deploring the lack of a real vision from most painters, and the need to turn to the modern; it also summarizes the dominance of the two major schools of thought of the time, that of Ingres versus Delacroix the colorist (91-95), both of whom the Goncourts dislike.

46 This yearly prize was attributed after a series of tests and provided four years of study of the Italian masters at the Villa Medici in Rome (the seat of the French Academy in Italy).

47 The annual Salon was a state event in which a jury comprised of Academy members would choose paintings to be exhibited in the Salon Carré of the Louvre. Success at the Salon was a guarantee of commercial commissions and financial success for selected artists. The Realist and later the Impressionist school, although they despised the Salon because it represented the rigidity and old-fashioned ways of the Academy, still attempted to exhibit there because of the prestige and publicity it provided. In 1863, where more than 3000 paintings were refused by the jury of the Salon, Napoleon III agreed to organize the Salon des Refusés as a pendant to the official venue, in which the artists who had been denied had the opportunity to show their work and be judged directly by the public. (cf. Blake and Fascina)
others. The Goncourts’ descriptions of Manette range from the most beautiful pages of the text—a masterful description of her posing for instance—to the most offensive of the novel, regarding her Jewishness notably.\(^{48}\) Manette is the only professional model of my corpus and she is at first celebrated for her understanding of the artist’s work and her contribution to the creative process.\(^{49}\) As Coriolis himself tells Anatole:

Figure-toi une femme qui travaille avec vous jusqu’à ce qu’elle soit tombée dans votre pose… Et une fois qu’elle y est, c’est superbe!… on bûcherait deux heures, qu’elle ne bougerait pas… C’est qu’elle a l’air de porter un intérêt à ce que vous faites… Oh! mon cher, c’est étonnant… Tu sais, ça se voit quand ça ne va pas… Il y a des riens… un mouvement de lèvres, un geste… On est nerveux… il vous passe des inquiétudes dans le corps… Enfin, ça se voit… Eh bien! cette mâtine-là, quand elle voyait que ça ne marchait pas, elle avait l’air aussi ennuyé que ma peinture… Et puis, quand j’ai commencé à m’échauffer, quand ça s’est mis à venir, voilà qu’elle a eu un air content! Il me semblait qu’elle s’épanouissait… Tiens! je vais te dire quelque chose de stupide: on aurait dit que sa peau était heureuse!… Vrai! je voyais le reflet de ma toile sur son corps, et il me semblait qu’elle était chatouillée là où je donnais un coup de pinceau… Une bêtise, je te dis… quelque chose de bizarre comme le magnétisme, le courant de caresse d’un portait à une figure… Et puis, à chaque repos, si tu avais vu sa comédie! […] Elle ne disait rien… elle se regardait… une femme qui se voit dans une glace, absolument… (276)

Unlike Balzac’s Gillette, who suffers from the pose, and later Christine in Zola’s L’Œuvre, who also fearfully approaches the act of posing, Manette is not adversely affected by the creative process. On the contrary, Manette’s body actively and almost symbiotically interacts with the painting. Her skin becomes a sort of mirror that reflects the work of art—“le reflet de ma toile sur son corps”—at the same time as the canvas surface acts as a mirror of her body—“une femme qui se voit dans une glace.” Manette is thus very different from Gillette or Christine in the sense that she is not a helpless woman

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\(^{48}\) I will examine this passage in detail further on.

\(^{49}\) Gillette in Balzac’s “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu” and Christine in Zola’s L’Œuvre both accept to model for their lovers reluctantly and out of love.
who submits to her artist-lover’s desires. Manette is a professional model whose life revolves around art, as though she were an artist herself. As Coriolis states: “Elle est persuadée que c’est son corps qui fait les tableaux… Il y a des femmes qui se voient une immortalité n’importe où, dans le ciel, dans le paradis, dans des enfants, dans le souvenir de quelqu’un… elle, c’est sur la toile!” (277)

Manette is deeply attached to her profession and she is narcissistically in love with her own body, seeing it as an inspiration for great art. Manette’s turning-point in the novel coincides with her becoming a mother, at which point that which was only a latent aspect of her personality—her Jewishness—becomes the most prominent one. From this moment on, Manette becomes a Jewish stereotype: greedy and materialistic. The Goncourts’ otherwise impeccable prose lends itself to the most shameful anti-Semitism:

Des entrailles de la mère, la juive avait jailli. Et la persévérance froide, l’entêtement résolu, la rapacité originelle de sa race, s’étaient levés des semences de son sang, dans de sourdes cupidités passionnées de femme rêvant de l’argent sur la tête de son enfant. (424)

Manette thus appears as a multifaceted creature whose initial stimulating impact on Coriolis turns into a destructive gesture as she transforms herself into a greedy Jewess who eats away at the artist’s integrity and ambition. A counterpart of Salome in her image as the seductive temptress, Manette’s character evolves from an independent, free-spirited professional model to a manipulative woman.

The Goncourts further describe Coriolis as naturally predisposed to be dominated by a woman, and he is often referred to as a weak man. The brothers extended their naturalist experiment to grant Coriolis a Creole origin, an aristocratic status, and a “fond de tempêrament féminin” (232), the combination of which accounts for his natural
instinct of nonchalance and his tendency to let himself be influenced by his entourage. As the novel progresses, Manette subtly takes advantage of Coriolis’s intrinsic weaknesses; he is last seen in the novel on the day of his wedding with Manette, defeated and conquered.

Manette Salomon weaves a complex web of plot—the destruction of a talent by a woman—and subplots—Anatole’s tribulations, Garnotelle’s success story, Crescent’s reclusive art—attributing more narrative space to subplots and digressions than to its central story. As Carol Armstrong harshly characterizes it: “Jumble, confusion, sketchiness—these words are descriptive of the structure and thematics of the entire novel of Manette Salomon, as Goncourt was happy to admit in accepting Zola’s dictum, ‘a series of watercolor washes and sketches.’ Overtly, Manette Salomon is a rambling, chatty novel with no central narrative, no significant moral to point, and no real protagonist” (8).

Despite the disorganized aspect of the narration, Manette Salomon offers a fascinating perspective on the art world of the 1830s through the 1860s and provides us with a fine illustration of the convergence of painting and literature. In this chapter, we will follow Coriolis’s evolution from an Orientalist painter to the “painter of modern

50 Coriolis is from an Italian family who settled in Provence, and who escaped the 1789 Revolution by going to the Bourbon island, nowadays called Ile de la Réunion. The Goncourts describe Manette’s annihilation of Coriolis as a reminiscence of the “conflits de religions” of the earlier century where “ce misérable concubinage d’un peintre et d’un modèle” becomes emblematic of the “entre-mangeries de races” (322).

51 Some will find it problematic to characterize Anatole’s tribulations as a subplot insofar as his (mis)adventures fill more pages in the novel than Coriolis’s story. The title Manette Salomon “dictates” this categorization but Manette’s presence also creates the downfall of Anatole, both personally and artistically. On a personal level, Anatole, who used to live off of Coriolis’s generosity, is left to fend for himself. As far as his artistic ambition, Anatole, although not very talented, found encouragement through Coriolis as well as work. When Mme Crescent presents him with the opportunity to work at the Jardin des Plantes, he is saddened to see “la mort honteuse du rêve de toute sa vie” (537) but nevertheless accepts, conscious that this is his only opportunity for a decent life.
life,” to borrow Baudelaire’s phrase, to a visionary announcing abstract art. We will also analyze the Goncourts’ *écriture artiste*, where the techniques of Impressionism enrich the descriptive passages of the text and offer a prime example of the ekphrastic mode of writing.

_Ecriture Artist and “Tableau Litteraire”_

They made a tour, two tours; then Coriolis, leaning against a grille of the garden, looked ahead, a distracted and absorbed look. The rain was falling steadily, a soft, tender, penetrating, fertile rain. The air, streaked with water, had a wash of this blue-violet which the paint imitates the transparency of a large glass. In this day of neutral light, the jet of water seemed a bouquet of white light, and the white which clothed the children had the softness of a diffuse radiance. The silk of the umbrellas turning in the hands flashed there, there. The first bright smile of green began on the branches of the trees, where one could see like lumps of paint, springlike strokes seming a light smudge of green dust. And in the background, the garden, the passersby, the chipped bronze of the Chasseresse, the stone and sculptures of the palace, appeared, fading in a wet distance, soaking in a crystal fog, with blurred appearances of submerged images. (280-1)

Interspersed throughout the novel and adding to the fragmentary quality of the text are long descriptive passages devoted to a particular Parisian locale or to the countryside. The passage above opens with Coriolis apprehending the phenomenon of the falling rain at the Palais-Royal through his artist’s eyes. It is not fortuitous that such a description should occur as Coriolis is walking back from having bought a supply of colors at Desfürges, as it seems that he imagines these same colors already in action in the falling rain. The vocabulary of painting permeates the description: “une lavure,” “la peinture,” “des coups de pinceau,” “des touches,” “des frottis;” and Coriolis perceives the rain as though it were a canvas in front of his eyes. Various colors punctuate the passage,
granting touches of blue, white, green, black, and “bronze rouillé” here and there. The language becomes almost lyrical, metamorphosing into a de facto *pinceau* to infuse the narrative with a poetic quality: “un bouquet de lumière blanche,” “le premier sourire vif du vert.” Geometrical lines situate various *points de fuite* for the painting: the rain is like rays in the air, while also forming a “jet d’eau;” the lines of the Palais-Royal in the background are blurred by the rainy and foggy atmosphere (“brouillard de cristal”). The indication “dans le fond” suggests an attention to the composition of the scene as it describes first what constitutes the foreground (the rain and the trees with the various colors that attract the eye) and then the background (the various indistinct buildings). The narrative is the canvas on which the now permeable boundaries of art and life fuse.

This description of the rain in the Palais-Royal corresponds to what Hartzell has termed a “tableau littéraire.” Hartzell defines the “tableau littéraire” as a descriptive passage that reads as though it were a painting (it can relate to a particular painting but usually does not and rather apprehends nature as though it were a painting) and that bears the following general qualities:

[Le tableau littéraire] doit réjouir l’œil; toute matière morale ou littéraire doit être mise à l’écart; il doit être le résultat d’une impression personnelle de la réalité; les effets de la lumière (surtout de la lumière sur la chair) y sont très importants; le ciel est un élément important qui doit s’accorder avec le reste du sujet; il doit avoir la spontanéité d’un premier jet. (140)

Just like ekphrasis was charged with being “ornamental” in the narration, Hartzell notes that a “tableau littéraire” usually stalls the narration and is a purely descriptive piece that, according to him, is not necessary to the unfolding of the action and that stands as a mainly aesthetic endeavor. This device betrays the Goncourts’ own skillful habit of
finding potential paintings in what they see. Hartzell quotes this passage from the

*Journal*:

Il y eut un tableau charmant. On […] entassa [les petites filles] dans une petite voiture traînée par un pauvre âne. Un petit paysan à la blouse volante tapait sur le bourri. Toutes riaient, criaient, se démenaient. Une charreté de bonheurs de huit ans, *point de peintres pour rendre cela!* (qtd in Hartzell 54; my emphasis)

It is clear that Coriolis has inherited from his creators the ability to find art already in nature—a tendency that will be confirmed when he meets Manette whom he believes to be a masterpiece of nature. While Anatole can get discouraged and jokingly admit that “la nature l’enfonçait, et que le bon Dieu était décidément plus fort que la peinture” (349) and while Chassagnol declares that “je n’aime que ce qu’a fait l’homme […] cette grande étendue jaune et verte, cette machine qu’on est convenu d’appeler la nature, c’est un grand rien du tout pour moi… du vide mal colorié qui me rend les yeux tristes” (345); Coriolis, on the other hand, feels constrained and conflicted. Simultaneously in awe of and called into question as an artist by the very nature with which he competes:

Coriolis passait ses journées dans la forêt, sans peindre, sans dessiner, laissant se faire en lui ces croquis inconscients, ces espèces d’esquisses flottantes que fixent plus tard la mémoire et la palette du peintre. Une émotion, une émotion presque religieuse le prenait chaque fois, quand, au bout d’un quart d’heure, il arrivait à l’avenue du Bas-Bréau: il se sentait devant une des grandes majestés de la Nature. Et il demeurait toujours quelques minutes dans une sorte de ravissement respectueux et de silence ému de l’âme, en face de cette entrée d’allée, de cette porte triomphale, où les arbres portaient sur l’arc de leurs colonnes superbes l’immense verdure pleine de la joie du jour. (333)

Coriolis thus absorbs what he sees in a moment of fruitful observation. The passage above opens up a five-page-long description of what Coriolis sees in the forest. Again, much as in the passage of the rain at the Palais-Royal, we are guided by Coriolis’s perception, by the fact that he turns what he sees in nature into a “croquis inconscient” to
become a “mémoire.” However, the fact remains that Coriolis never actually paints a view of this forest which is imprinted only in his mind but which finds a concrete venue in the Goncourts’ masterful description:

Des deux côtés du chemin, il avait des dessous de bois, des fonds de ce vert doux et tendre qu’a l’ombre des forêts dans la transparence pénétrante du midi, et que déchire ça et là un zigzag de soleil, un rayon courant, frémissant jusqu’au bout d’une branche, voletant sur les feuilles, en ayant l’air d’y allumer une rampe de feu d’émeraude. Plus près de lui, des petits genévriers en pyramide étincelaient de luisants de givre; et les houx rampants remuaient sur le vernis de leurs feuilles une lumière métallique et liquide, l’éblouissement blanc d’un diamant dans une goutte d’eau. (334)

The vocabulary of painting permeates this passage from the omnipresence of colors to the indication of lines delineating the perspective of the scene. This description is fraught with the energy emanating from the natural elements of the forest: the “zigzag de soleil” moves swiftly along the branches of the trees, providing touches of green; while the “houx rampants” release a “lumière métallique et liquide.” The preoccupation here, as well as in the description of the rain at the Palais-Royal, is with the dissemination of light and how each color appears as a thin, quick brushstroke placed pertinently on the canvas. This concern reflects of course Coriolis’s aesthetic endeavor to provide a new way of representing light on canvas, a light that would pervade the canvas and make it more vibrant.

After analyzing these two passages, it is difficult to corroborate Hartzell’s argument according to which the “tableau littéraire” could be removed from the narration without affecting the action (72). It might be true of other works by the Goncourt

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52 This argument goes back to Krieger’s argument according to which ekphrasis interrupts the flow of the narration. As we saw in Chapter One, ekphrasis resists such interpretation in the sense that it is not a purely descriptive practice but, rather, it blurs the boundaries between description and narration.
brothers, but as far as Manette Salomon is concerned, I believe these “tableaux” serve the purpose of showing the artist caught in the act of observation: most of these “tableaux littéraires” occur as Coriolis—and Anatole to a lesser extent—are observing the world around them. Perhaps more than the ekphrases of their respective paintings, these tableaux express the artists’ inner potential; in other words, what they could be achieving were they able to translate onto canvas their artistic vision of the world.

Coriolis’s strolls through the Barbizon forest are fruitful insofar as they are part of his apprenticeship and serve to underline his unique way of viewing the world. Moreover, from a narratological point of view, they fuel the artistic and aesthetic aspect of the story. They further emphasize the painter’s long periods of creative incubation: while Coriolis absorbs the sights and the colors around him, he does not paint. He returns from his eight-year tour of Asia Minor with a pet monkey, which Anatole later adopts, and a myriad of exotic objects that fill up his studio, but empty-handed as far as sketches or paintings per se are concerned. In the same way, his stay in the Barbizon forest does not yield any artwork either. His flâneries function as long educational periods during which he trains his eye to absorb the intrinsic beauty of nature; and on a less subtle level, they also serve as exercises in style by the Goncourt brothers. Interestingly, most of Coriolis’s visual experiences are recorded verbally (through letters notably) rather than through paintings.53

This training in nature rather than in the confines of an academic studio along with the emphasis on the artist’s perception and observation of nature are characteristics

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53 We will see later that the first “work” we encounter by Coriolis is not a painting but rather a letter to Anatole from Asia where he describes a few sites that will become the subject matters of his first Salon-submitted canvases.
that remind one of the Impressionists. The Goncourts, who were vocal about everything and everyone in their *Journal*, barely mentioned the Impressionist movement in it, and that their few comments were rather negative and mistrustful of this new way of painting they did not fully comprehend. However, the Goncourts’ *écriture artiste* bears undeniable resemblances to the Impressionist endeavor. In the *Journal*, Edmond notes:

> Je voudrais trouver des touches de phrases semblables à des touches de peintre dans une esquisse: des effleurements et des caresses et, pour ainsi dire, des glaçis de la chose écrite, qui échapperaient à la lourde, massive, bêtasse syntaxe des corrects grammairiens. (qtd in Hartzell 109)

Edmond thus makes explicit his desire to write as though he were painting. One step he proposes is to loosen syntax in order to write more fluidly; and as Hartzell suggests, this prefigures the Impressionists’ breaking with the rules of academic painting. The idea of “des touches de phrase” also reminds one of the Impressionist technique of dabs of paint and short brushstrokes. Another key element in Edmond de Goncourt’s entry is the fact that he wishes to emulate “des touches de peintre dans une esquisse,” that is, to reproduce the *impression* of the unfinished product, of the spontaneity of the sketch.

Various critics have studied what has been called the Goncourts’ Impressionism,\(^{54}\) and noted that the *écriture artiste*, as already mentioned, is reminiscent of the Impressionist undertaking starting with the importance of observation and impression. The term “écriture artiste” was coined by Edmond de Goncourt in his preface to *Les Frères Zemganno* where he explains:

> Le Réalisme, pour user du mot bête, du mot drapeau, n’a pas en effet l’unique mission de décrire ce qui est bas, ce qui est répugnant, ce qui pue, il est venu au monde aussi, lui, pour définir dans de l’écriture *artiste*, ce qui est élevé, ce qui est joli, ce qui sent bon, et encore pour donner les

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\(^{54}\) See especially Caramaschi’s *Réalisme et Impressionnisme dans l’œuvre des frères Goncourt* and Goode’s *Manette Salomon: Art as a Theme and the Artist’s World in Fictional Narrative*. 
aspects et les profils des êtres raffinés et des choses riches: mais cela, en une étude appliquée, rigoureuse, et non conventionnelle et non imaginative de la beauté. (qtd in Mitterand 271; author’s italics)

Beyond the elitism of Edmond, we can see that the écriture artiste is supposed to, through a Realist lens and careful study, write beauty. As Mitterand notes, this definition is far from thorough. However, the allusion to Realism reveals that the Goncourts wished to be truthful to a certain vision of the world—even if they did not agree with Courbet that the way to accomplish this was to start representing what they call “ce qui est bas.”

As Mitterand suggests and as we have already noted, at the root of the écriture artiste is the notion of observation, or “vision,” to use his term (271). Mitterand sums up the main characteristics of their style as follows:

Mais on saisit aussi plusieurs des aspects stylistiques de cet éclatement de la vision: l’accumulation des groupes nominaux, l’inflation des caractérisants, notamment des participes passés et des participes présents, le mélange volontaire des objets, les gros plans insistants, le tripotage de l’expression dans la recherche appliquée de la “note juste.” La syntaxe s’étire au-delà de toute limite. L’œil du lecteur papillote et s’éblouit devant un kaléidoscope déréglé. (274)

The écriture artiste is meant to excite the reader’s eye and to stimulate it as though it were looking at a painting. For me then, the Goncourts’ écriture artiste is the clearest example and most radical instance of literary ekphrasis in the nineteenth century in the sense that it translates what is fundamentally and inherently a personal, idiosyncratic visual experience, into words.

55 Interestingly, the Goncourts’ subject matters for their novels did not, for the most part, deal with the bourgeoisie or the wealthy. Germinie Lacerteux (1865) for instance chronicles the life of a servant and La Fille Elisa (1877) relates that of a prostitute.

56 By transforming, through visual experience, a sight into a “tableau,” the Goncourts prefigure Proust and his masterful description of the aubépines for instance.
Boulevard des Capucines by Monet (1873; Figure 18) provides a fine visual counterpart to the Goncourts’ écriture artiste and its mise en pratique in the two “tableaux littéraires” we analyzed. Monet’s painting proposes a view of the Boulevard des Capucines as though from a balcony, giving an in-depth but distant perspective of the busy street on a winter day. There are four distinct parts in the painting: the green-blue sky at the top edge of the frame; tall buildings on the left; a column of almost bare trees flanked to the left by a line of parked coaches that divides the canvas diagonally; and finally, to the right of the trees, the passers-by. The contrast between the cold whites, green and blue shades of both the ground and the sky with the warmth of the reddish-brown column of trees at the center of the canvas creates the general tone of the painting. This dichotomy is upset by a surprising patch of orange—what seems to be a fire—in the midst of the passers-by and a few drops of a discrete red that livens the otherwise mostly dark garments of most of the passers-by. The buildings emerging in the distance are barely discernible from the sky and are only delineated by slightly darker blue lines. There are no details in the representation of the people; rather, they look like sophisticated blurbs of black. The overall impression is that of quick brushstrokes applied pertinently to form a sophisticated and yet sketchy view of the Boulevard. The spectator understands that this painting captures a particular and unique moment in time and that the painter presents us with his impression of the scene: a synchronic snapshot of what he saw as he saw it.

The reason why I chose this painting to illustrate the Goncourts’ écriture artiste is because I believe that the use of contrasting colors and surprising touches—the fire for instance—the quick brushstrokes and the unfinished quality of the overall painting are
what the Goncourts try to convey through their “tableaux littéraires” and overall style. I would like to offer one last example of a “tableau littéraire,” this one devoted to a view of the city of Paris; the only view of the city per se in the whole novel:

Au-delà de la cime des sapins, un peu balancés, sous lesquels s’apercevait nue, dépouillée, rougie, presque carminée, la grande allée du jardin plus haut que les immenses toits de tuile verdâtres de la Pitié et que ses lucarnes à chaperon de crépi blanc, l’œil embrassait tout l’espace entre le dôme de la Salpêtrière et la masse de l’Observatoire; d’abord, un grand plan d’ombre, ressemblant à un lavis d’encre de Chine sur un dessous de sanguine, une zone de tons ardents et bitumeux, brûlés de ces roussissures de gelée et de ces chaleurs d’hiver qu’on retrouve sur la palette d’aquarelle des Anglais; puis, dans la finesse infinie d’une teinte dégradée, il se levait un rayon blanchâtre, une vapeur laiteuse et nacrée, trouée du clair des bâtisses neuves, et où s’effaçaient, se mêlaient, se fondaient, en s’opalisant, une fin de capitale, des extrémités de faubourg, des bouts de rue perdues. (82)

This passage belongs to the first chapter of the novel and thus sets the tone for the descriptive aspects of the text. The vantage point here resembles that of the Monet painting insofar as one specific eye guides and orients the description providing a higher vantage point than what it describes. This passage is once more the result of a personal observation, just like the rain falling on the Palais-Royal and the Fontainebleau forest were seen through Coriolis’s eyes. In one long sentence and one sweeping movement, the space between La Salpêtrière and l’Observatoire is covered. The description functions through areas of light and shade and pertinent masses of colors emphasizes specific elements here and there.

As Hartzell notes, “dans les tableaux littéraires, les Goncourt décrivent la peinture d’une scène et non pas la scène elle-même” (109). Just as one would describe a painting, the description isolates and follows different parts of the composition: in the foreground, from underneath the trees emerges the path to the garden; then, the shaded area with its
mixture of “encre de Chine” and “un dessous de sanguine;” and finally, the source of light with the whitish ray of light emanating from the “finesse infinie d’une teinte dégradée.” The overall effect of the scene is one of ethereality confirmed by the explicit reference to British watercolors, that is, a kind of painting where transparent, light colors dominate (as opposed to the opaque quality of oil painting). The city itself is described as an indistinct, remote fragment—“une fin de capitale,” “des bouts de rues perdues”—that barely appears in the distance. Paris rises much like the edifices in the background of Monet’s *Boulevard des Capucines*, almost indiscernible from the sky and yet undeniably present. The description respects the impression of the scene on the observer: what is seen clearly and what is not. It does not offset the details that are missing because of the distance; rather, as in Monet’s painting, what is blurry to the eye of the observer remains so for the reader.

The contrast between the light and shaded areas is lessened by the touches of different hues of red that punctuate the scene and function to liven the overall effect of the otherwise two-toned tableau. Explicit comparisons with painting (the British watercolors) alongside the terminology of painting (“lavis,” “sanguine,” “palette d’aquarelle,” “teinte dégradée”) substantiate the idea that the observer is watching this scene as though it were a work of art. The syntax of this long sentence mirrors the act of observation, of *taking in* the sight offered to one’s eyes. The enumeration of the different elements composing the scene and the abundance of comas function like brushstrokes on canvas. Painting becomes a mode of writing in the poetics of the *écriture artiste*. The Goncourts’ signature style is ekphrastic in essence in that it writes the world visually, treating the page as through it were a canvas and the pen as though it were a brush.
CORIOLIS’S EARLY WORKS

Almost as soon as we meet Coriolis in the novel, he sets out for his eight-year long tour of Asia Minor and the Goncourts provide us with just enough information to understand what kind of painter he is. We learn that at the Atelier Langibout where he studies with Anatole and Garnotelle, he stands out because of his aristocratic background, which sets him apart from the more modest conditions of the majority of the young artists in the Atelier. Aesthetically, he also sets himself apart with his fierce rejection of academic training and his willingness to experience things and forge his artistic personality away from the stifling restrictions of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Langibout does not understand Coriolis’s distinct style and is wary of his “esquisses si vives et si colorées” (115). Coriolis explains to Anatole before leaving for Asia Minor that: “Il me faut quelque chose qui me change… du mouvement… Je suis ennuyé de moi, de ma peinture, de l’atelier, de ce qu’on nous serine ici… Il me semble que je suis fait pour autre chose […] On m’a souvent dit que j’avais un tempérament de coloriste… Nous verrons bien!” (116). From the onset then, Coriolis appears different from his peers and armed with a firm ambition to break with Academic teachings and direct his efforts toward a renewed vision of color.

Coriolis remains absent from the narration—which focuses instead on Anatole’s tribulations—for twenty chapters, appearing twice through the letters he sends to Anatole from various Oriental locations. Our initial first-hand experience of Coriolis as an artist is thus as a writer rather than a painter. In his letters, he describes to Anatole the various landscapes and colors he is able to observe and absorb during his stay. His first letter from Adramiti, near Troy, shapes into words the sights he is experiencing. The Goncourts
grant Coriolis their *écriture artiste* and transform his letter into a “tableau littéraire.” The painter starts by providing Anatole with an overview of the city—focused on the distinct colors that constitute it—and gradually concentrates on different and more detailed elements: the description of his guard’s weaponry; the detailed narration of a goat being killed by the local butcher; the depiction of his house and its surroundings; and finally, a glimpse of the women of Adramiti and in particular, the clichéd setting of the harem. These women, whom he sees through the rays of the shutters, are dancing and playing trombone and he chooses this “image,” as he calls it, to symbolize what he sees as being “l’Orient de l’avenir” that he envisions. In this first letter is thus encapsulated the future subject matter of the paintings he will produce after his return to Paris: his first Salon exhibitions, devoted to various landscape scenes; and the *Bain turc*, his final Orientalist endeavor, whose central figure is an enslaved woman.

The letters provide a literary venue for the “ébauche écrite” (237) of these canvases, and function as doubles of the actual ekphrases of the canvases he sends to the Salon. The painting of a Bohemian camp appears in the second letter to Anatole in the form of a one page-long sentence:

*Imagine*-toi une immense oasis, un bois d’arbres énormes et si pressés qu’ils donnent l’ombre d’une forêt […]; *imagine* là-dessous de l’eau, un bruit de sources chantantes, un serpentement de jolis ruisseaux clairs, et là-dedans, dans cette ombre, cette fraîcheur, ce murmure, *pense à l’effet* d’une centaine de bohémiens ayant accroché aux branches leur vie errante, campant là avec leurs tentes, leurs bestiaux, les hommes, le torse nu, fabriquant des armes […], de belles et sauvages jeunes filles dansant […], des femmes […] faisant cuire des agneaux entiers […], des petits enfants tout nus avec un tarbouch couvert de pièces de monnaie […]; tous, barbotant, s’éclaboussant, dans le bois d’eau et de soleil, courant après des oies effarouchées… (160)
The incipit of the passage presents the scene as though it were a storyboard of images. The interjections “Imagine” repeated twice and the expression “pense à l’effet” emphasize Coriolis’s wish for his reader to not only be able to visualize through his words what he is describing but also to experience the seemingly odd combination of the different elements of the scene—the oasis with its multitude of trees; the brooks with their whispering sound; and finally, the Bohemian camp that seems to graft itself onto the landscape. Coriolis’s letter carefully delineates the composition of the scene, which is governed by the play of light and shade, and that emphasizes the impression and effect it produces on its spectator. As yet another instance of “tableau littéraire,” it describes the camp as though it were a painted scene.

The ekphrastic passage seems to recast the letter:

Une lumière pareille à la horde qu’elle éclairait, errante et folle, des rayons perdu, l’éparpillement du soleil dans les bois, des zigzags de ruisseau, des oripeaux de sorcière et de fée, un mélange de basse-cour, de dortoir et de forge, des berceaux multicolores, comme de petits lits d’Arlequin accrochés aux arbres, un troupeau d’enfants, de vieilles, de jeunes filles, le camp de misère et d’aventure, sous son dôme de feuilles, avec son tapage et son fouillis, revivaient dans la peinture claire, cristallisée, pétillante de Coriolis, pleine de retroussis de pinceau, d’accentuations qui, dans les masses, relevaient un détail, jetaient de l’esprit sur une figure, sur une silhouette. (237)

The various elements cited in the letter are present here in a more concise form, stripped of the details, through the rapid apposition of nominal groups. The particular attention to light is in keeping with Coriolis’s ambition to “faire de la lumière avec des couleurs” (88) and to reproduce the “lumière diffuse” (235) he had identified as the core distinction of the Orient, “un Orient de lumière aux ombres blondes, tout pétillant de couleurs tendres” (234). In this complex sentence where verbs lack, all the elements of the scene combine to revive (“raviver”) Coriolis’s personal image of the camp. The rapid apposition of
nominal groups suggests a lack of emphasis on any particular element in the scene. In other words, there is no clear focus in this painting, no central figure to identify as part of a narrative. This is a picture for the eye, to rejoice the eye as the Goncourts would say; it is not, however, a picture that tells a story.57

Moreover, the term “revivait” suggests the picture’s power to animate and bring the scene to life. In the letter, the expressions “Imagine-toi” and “pense à l’effet” were meant to ‘force’ the reader to visualize the scene. In the ekphrasis, however, the tone is less personal and more focused on Coriolis’s way of painting. It sheds a critical eye on Coriolis’s art, characterizing it as a “peinture claire, cristallisée, pétillante” which emphasizes light and brightness. Coriolis’s technique also appears through the terms “retroussis de pinceau” and “accentuations.” These “accentuations,” which allow him to highlight certain elements and detach them from the “masses” seem to me to indicate the sketchy aspect of Coriolis’s paintings and the lack of emphasis on any one particular element. As in Monet’s *Boulevard des Capucines*, details appear through touches of color that make specific details salient. The juxtaposition of the letter—where Coriolis’s prose gives us a glimpse of how his vision functions—and the ekphrastic passage, each giving a similar account and yet a different perspective on the scene/painting, indicates the way Coriolis translates what he sees onto canvas and manages to convey his impressions in his artworks.

57 The Goncourts chastise the conventional critics who place the content of the work of art above the impression it produces on the eye: “ces juges d’art qui n’apprécient jamais l’art par cette impression spontanée, la sensation, mais par la réflexion, par une opération de cerveau, par une application et un jugement d’idées” (250).
His second painting, a view of Adramiti, is, like the Bohemian camp, the object of a double description: first in letter form and second through ekphrasis. The letter reads as follows:

Figure-toi que ton ami habite une ville où tout est rose, bleu clair, cendre verte, lilas tendre… Rien que des couleurs gaies qui font: pif! paf! dans les yeux dès qu’il y a un peu de soleil. [...] Enfin, c’est éblouissant et je me fais l’effet d’être logé dans la vitrine des pierres précieuses au musée de minéralogie. [...] Donc, il y a toujours de l’eau, et dans cette eau, tu comprends, tout ce carnaval se reflète, et toutes les couleurs tremblent, dansent: c’est absolument comme un feu d’artifice tiré sur la Seine que tu verrais dans le ciel et dans la rivière… Et des baraques! des auvents! des boutiques! un remuement de kaléidoscopes, sans compter ce qui grouille là-dedans, le personnel du pays, des gens qui sont turquoise ou vermillon, des femmes turques, de vrais fantômes avec des bottes jaunes, des femmes grecques avec de larges pantalons, des chemises flottantes, un voile foncé qui leur cache la moitié de la figure, des mendians… (123)

Again, this is Coriolis in his observation phase. His eye and focus are drawn first and foremost to the diversity of colors the city has to offer and each element appears to him through the distinct color it brings to the landscape. The population whirlwinds in a kaleidoscopic movement of colors, through little touches of “turquoise ou vermillon” and “jaun[e].” In the very first line, the city itself rises through a rainbow of pastel colors whose brightness hits the eye and reminds Coriolis of gemstones. He records his impressions—”je me fais l’effet”—and the informal nature of the letter reinforces the personal aspect of the description. The numerous exclamations translate Coriolis’s marveling at this explosion of colors which he tries to make relevant for Anatole through the comparison with fireworks on the Seine. The conversational tone of the letter—it is as though he were talking to Anatole—lends itself to the staccato rhythm and the apposition of nominal groups typical of the Goncourts’ *écriture artiste*. Coriolis apprehends the world around him through the color palette it offers.
This highly personal account of the city of Adramiti is complemented by the following ekphrasis of the painting Coriolis submits for the 1852 Salon:

Sa seconde toile faisait voir une vue d’Adramiti. D’une touche fraîche et légère, avec des tons de fleurs, la palette d’un vrai bouquet, Coriolis avait jeté sur la toile le riant éblouissement de ce morceau de ciel tout bleu, de ces baroques maisons blanches, de ces galeries vertes, rouges, de ces costumes éclatants, de ces flaques d’eau où semble croupir l’azur noyé. Il y avait là un rayonnement d’un bout à l’autre, sans ombre, sans noir, un décor de chaleur, de soleil, de vapeur, l’Orient fin, tendre, brillant, mouillé de poussière d’eau de pierres précieuses, l’Orient de l’Asie Mineure, comme l’avait vu et comme l’aimait Coriolis. (237)

The tone of this passage differs greatly from the casualness of the letter but it nevertheless is a *reprise* of Coriolis’s “ébauche écrite”.58 The “touche fraîche et légère” seems to me reminiscent of the light tone of the letter while the pastels he had mentioned to Anatole are encompassed here in the poetic expression “des tons de fleurs, la palette d’un vrai bouquet.” This ekphrastic passage is quite succinct and remains very general in its descriptive content. What it emphasizes is the overall atmosphere that the canvas generates: that of a permeating light that obliterates any need for dark colors and areas of shade and which translates into the “rayonnement d’un bout à l’autre” Coriolis had expressed in his letter. Similarly to the previous painting of the Bohemian camp, the lack of focus of the canvas brings all its elements in the foreground, in a rejection of any narrative aspect in the composition.

Finally, the last painting of this first Salon is described as such:

Le troisième de ses tableaux représentait une caravane sur la route de Troie. C’était l’heure frémissante et douce où le soleil va se lever; les premiers feux, blancs et roses, répandant le matin dans le ciel, semblaient jeter les changeantes couleurs tendres de la nacre sur le lever du jour vers lequel, le cou tendu, les chameaux respiraient. (237)

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58 This expression applies in the text to the description of the Bohemian camp only but I believe it is relevant for this ekphrasis as well.
This “original” description—since there is no precedent of this scene in letter format—is also the shortest of the three. It announces its subject matter straightforwardly: it is a caravan in the early morning hours. And yet, we know very little regarding what and who appears in it, except for the camels. Pastel colors are reminiscent of the view of Adramati and again, the emphasis is on the brightness of the palette: the “feux” suggest the intensity of the rising sun and the verb “jeter” reflects the energy characteristic of Coriolis’s mode of painting. This complete lack of details and the focus on the changing light indicates the experimental quality of this particular painting: there is nothing to look at but rather everything to see. It could be reminiscent of Monet’s endeavor in *Impression: Soleil levant* (1872; Figure 11) where the aesthetic experiment with colors—the different hues of blue and orange that comprise the sunlight—overpowers any thematic and narrative aspect of the canvas.

MANETTE: GALATEA COME TO LIFE

The reaction to Coriolis’s three Orientalist paintings is twofold: one negative from the public and the critics who do not adhere to Coriolis’s new vision;\(^{59}\) one positive from the new wave of both critics and artists seeking a certain renewal and liberation from the constraints and monotony of academic art. Energized and motivated by his *succès de scandale*, Coriolis believes he needs to “se révéler avec les puissantes qualités du peintre” (257), that is to say, reconcile his colorist tendency with an intense focus on line and design. In order to complete this holistic endeavor, he chooses to do a nude. As he

\(^{59}\) The Goncourts note that the critics and the public’s idea of the Orient had been shaped by Decamps from whom Coriolis differs in his approach.
struggles to create his central female figure, blaming it partly on the lack of good models (259), he finally meets Manette by chance, while traveling on the bus:

Ici, une éclipse… elle a tourné le dos à la lanterne… sa figure en face de moi est une ombre toute noire, un vrai morceau d’obscurité… plus rien, qu’un coup de lumière sur un coin de sa tempe et sur un bout de son oreille où pend un petit bouton de diamant qui jette un feu de diable… […] Je ne la vois plus que par éclairs… toujours sa pose… son oreille et le petit diamant… […] Mon cher, elle a passé devant moi avec une marche, des gestes de statue, paroles d’honneur… (265; my emphases)

Manette appears intermittently as glimpses of light break the obscurity of the night. Her face remains for the most part in the dark except for the diamond in her ear whose éclat seems to dazzle Coriolis. What strikes the artist then is not her face since he cannot see it but rather her posture and especially the fact that she walks like a statue. She is Galatea already come to life. At this point in the text, Coriolis has already started his Bain turc, the Orientalist nude painting meant to showcase his talent and define him as a chef d’école. He desperately seeks a model “qui ait pour un liard de race, de distinction” (259) and he believes, unaware as he is that she is a professional model, that he has found it in this particular woman.

The link between Manette’s physical appearance and art is emphasized from the onset and her first posing session for Coriolis confirms her status as an exceptional model. As she strikes the pose, she reminds Coriolis of a sculpture at the Louvre and the Goncourts digress on the topic of Nature as an artist:


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60 The first time she appears, she is about six years old and her mother visits Coriolis’s studio on the day before his departure for Asia Minor to offer Manette as a Christ figure. This first encounter will seal their destinies as Coriolis gives the then child a golden watch she conserves as a keepsake. Into her relationship with Coriolis, when she finally realizes that he was the man who gave her that watch, she finally agrees to cease posing and to become his and only his.
prend un corps qu’elle polit et finit avec amour, orgueil. Et c’est alors un véritable et divin être d’art qui sort des mains artistes de la Nature.

Le corps de Manette était un de ces corps-là: dans l’atelier, sa nudité avait mis tout à coup le rayonnement d’un chef-d’œuvre. (272)

Manette is thus a work of art in her own right, crafted by the divine hands of nature. Much like Baudelaire’s “Je suis belle, ô mortels, comme un rêve de pierre” (44), Manette represents ideal beauty, an idea to which the Goncourts were much attached. Just as the little diamond on her ear seemed to cast its éclat on the bus in the previously quoted passage, her body here radiates art and stands as a masterpiece. By glorifying Manette’s body, the Goncourts reiterate their idealistic aesthetic vision and posit the female body as the locus of artistic production.61

In keeping with his routine of long observation before setting to work, Coriolis stands at first in awe of his new model’s body as he examines each and every element of it:

Ses yeux se perdaient sur cette coloration si riche et si fine, ces passages de ton si doux, si variés, si nuancés, que tant de peintres expriment et croient idéaliser avec un rose banal et plat; ils embrassaient ces fugitives transparences, ces tendresses et ces tiédeurs de couleurs qui ne sont plus qu’à peine des couleurs, ces imperceptibles apparaences d’un bleu, d’un vert presque insensible, ombrant d’une adorable pâleur les diaphanités laiteuses de la chair, tout ce délicieux je-ne-sais-quoi de l’épiderme de la femme, qu’on dirait fait avec les dessous de l’aile des colombes, l’intérieur des roses blanches, la glauque transparence de l’eau baignant un corps. (273)

Coriolis’s eyes guide the description as we follow his inquisition of the refinements of Manette’s skin color. The Goncourts’ écriture artiste espouses the movement of the eyes.

61 In “Musée Goncourt: Manette Salomon and the Nude,” Therese Dolan argues that the Goncourts conceived Manette Salomon in part as a reaction against the assaults on the nude by Manet’s Olympia notably. The Goncourts, according to her, aligned themselves with Théophile Gautier’s hostile judgment of the painting and sought to present a nude that would focus on modern woman while still preserving the concept of beauty. (181)
and, through the juxtaposition of sentence fragments, provides a close-up view of Manette’s skin as though one were isolating and detailing a particular spot in a painting. The color declensions of Manette’s skin tone range from translucent greens and blues to a milky pallor. The abundance of allusions to the transparent quality of her skin—“fugitives transparences,” “à peine des couleurs,” “imperceptible apparence,” “presque insensible,” “pâleur,” “diaphanités,” “glauque transparence”—gives Manette an ethereal quality, as though she were not real but rather divine.

I must here note that this passage is excerpted from a three-page-long description of Manette striking a pose, a passage which starts with the details of her physical attitude—providing a general image of her—and which gradually becomes more specific as it focuses on the peculiar alliance of colors that define her skin. The final movement of description concentrates on specific parts of her body:

De cette taille, son regard allait au douillet modelage, aux inflexions, aux méplats, à la rondeur enveloppée, à la douce et voluptueuse ondulation d’un ventre de vierge, d’un ventre innocent, presque enfantin, sculpté dans la mollesse et délicatement dessiné dans le flou de sa chair: une petite lumière, à demi coulée au bord du nombril, semblait une goutte de rosée glissant dans l’ombre et le cœur d’une fleur. (274; authors’ emphasis)

Coriolis here considers the delineation of her body as though it were a sculpture, noting its youthfulness and sensuousness. Each nominal group addresses in the sentence a different aspect of her body to produce an overall impression of movement and modeling. Manette’s image as a “statue de nature” (270) becomes apparent through the vocabulary of art—“modelage,” “sculpté,” “dessiné dans le flou”—creates the persona of a freshly animated Galatea who reflects both innocence (“un ventre de vierge”) and desire (“voluptueuse ondulation”). The refinement of Manette’s physical beauty contrasts with the simplicity of her personality: she is (at first) indifferent to the materialistic aspect of
life and she lacks “les petits sens friands de la femme” (283). The Goncourts even note that “La toilette d’ailleurs lui allait mal: la mode faisait sur son admirable corps de faux plis comme sur un marbre” (184). She is rather *nu vivant*, fulfilled only when in the simplicity of her nakedness: “Vivre sur place, sans remuer, dans une sérénité de bien-être physique, dans l’harmonieux équilibre d’une pose à demi sommeillante, avec du linge fin et blanc sur la peau, c’était toute sa félicité” (284). In other words, she leads her life as though she were a statue, happily existing in the immobility of the pose.

Manette is thus described as a liminal being who is both flesh and marble, woman and statue, model and already work of art.62 Her body becomes the center of Coriolis’s personal and artistic universe because he makes the mistake of loving her as an artist and a man—”L’artiste aimait avec l’homme” (285). For him, she represents the ideal beauty he wishes to possess and reproduce on canvas and introduces the possibility of “un type nouveau de l’éternel féminin” for his art (286; authors’ emphasis). He starts resenting Manette’s modeling body as a “corps public qui s’offrait à l’art” (282) and demands unsuccessfully that she stop posing for others. His obsession turns into hallucination as he storms into other painters’ studios looking for her, taunted by the other canvases for which she posed:

\[\text{Mais il y avait à d’autres murs d’autres études que cette étude, pour tourmenter le regard de Coriolis et lui jeter à la face la publicité de sa maîtresse. Il la retrouvait partout, toujours, et même où elle n’était pas; car peu à peu c’était devenu chez lui une idée fixe, une folie, une hallucination, de vouloir la voir dans des toiles, dans des lignes, pour…}\]

62 Kaempfer and Chaperon comment on this liminality: “La femme monte sur l’escabeau, s’immobilise, et n’est plus chair appétissante; elle descend et redevient corps érotique […] Tantôt statue et métaphore (superbe et rassurante), tantôt femme et métonymie (envahissante et fatigante), le modèle semble imiter Galatée rejoignant Pygmalion” (34). However, I do not believe that Manette completely fits in this ‘schizophrenic’ scheme of the model insofar as she is not either/or but rather both at the same time: Coriolis perceives her as an erotic and artistic body simultaneously instead of successively and as we have seen, she herself retains the qualities of a statue even in her everyday life.
lesquelles elle n’avait pas posé: tous les corps, d’après les autres modèles, finissaient par ne lui montrer que ce corps, et toutes les nudités peintes des autres femmes le blessaient, comme si elles étaient la nudité de cette seule femme. (288)

Manette has become the emblem of the nude for Coriolis, who conflates her body with other models’ bodies and who internalizes her image to the point of seeing her in all works of art. She is the nude *par excellence*. What breaks the spell is Manette’s pregnancy, a new state of being that *kills* the model in her, in the words of the Goncourts. Manette’s narcissism ends as she contemplates her changing body with “l’amour d’une femme qui se regrette [et] la douleur d’une statue qui se pleure” (414).

MANETTE: MODEL, ARTIST, WOMAN

As a model, Manette is a malleable body that becomes the starting point of diverse artistic endeavors by Coriolis and others. A model’s body by definition is a *performing* body: one which does not represent the woman/man who models but which rather assumes the form the artist wants it to take so that their image can tell a story. A good example of the malleability of the model is Victorine Meurent, a favorite of Manet, who posed under various (and sometimes ambiguous) guises in *La Chanteuse de rue* (1862), *Mlle V. en costume d’espada* (1862), *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1863), *Olympia* (1863), *Le Fifre* (1866), *La Femme au perroquet* (1866), and *Le Chemin de fer* (1873).

As Carol Armstrong suggests, these paintings do not tell us much about Victorine

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63 Manette and Coriolis’s son resembles her in that he is also, in Coriolis’s eyes “une joie des yeux” (449). Coriolis notes his son’s resemblance to Italian paintings and to François Flamand’s figures (449). Once he recognizes this artistic quality in his son, “la paternité du bourgeois et de l’artiste s’éveilla en même temps chez le père” (449). This is problematic in the sense that the artist, according to Coriolis’s own definition, should be bound to spiritual things rather than earthly ones. His fatherhood is thus one more mistake that leads to his downfall.

64 Armstrong interprets Victorine’s presence in these various roles as a way for Manet to assert the “individuality” and “personality” of both “Manet’s style” and Meurent’s features” (30).
Meurent as a person (14) but rather of Manet’s perception of her and in that sense, Manet’s paintings with/of Victorine constitute a discourse around her rather than on her. Manet also did a *Portrait de Victorine Meurent* (1862; Figure 19) early on in their relationship. In this portrait, the shaded area that slashes across her face brings out some of her features—the nose and the eyes in particular—and gives Victorine a harsh appearance atypical of Manet’s paintings of her. She is represented with her signature forthright and determined gaze but she is not the overtly sexualized *Olympia* or the gender-ambiguous figure of the *Fifre* and *Mlle V. en costume d’espada*. It seems that in this portrait, Manet is trying to situate Victorine as a person.

As Lathers notes, the model’s role is “to ‘stand in’ for something (or someone), to ‘be’ a fiction” (11) and indeed, Victorine becomes fiction through Manet’s different representations of her. In the same way, Manette is also a fiction, not only because she is a character in a novel, but because, as I previously mentioned, what we know of her is through the other characters’ perception of her. Despite the multiple and masterful descriptions of her striking the pose, she actually poses for only two of Coriolis’s paintings, *Le Bain turc* and a *Portrait*. In *Le Bain turc*, as Crouzet notes, “elle vient symboliquement occuper une place tout faite […]: l’ébauche, la pose, la forme sont prétes; mais il faut ‘la nature,’ la réalité, un modèle. La femme doit remplir ce vide de la toile” (15; my emphasis). Manette thus comes to fill a void, not to inspire a whole painting. Her body is what Coriolis sought in order to fulfill his aesthetic ambition; but she does not spark this ambition, rather, she feeds it.

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65 Armstrong reminds us that the boy figure in *Le Fifre* is in fact a combination of Victorine and Léon Leenhoff, Manet’s stepson (13).
66 I will address the *Bain turc* in detail in the next section.
Additionally, it is important to note that Manette is portrayed as an artist in her own right. Once she has finally accepted to be Coriolis’s exclusive model, she spends time posing for herself in front of the mirror, becoming both artist and model at the same time:

Et à la fin, comme sous un long modelage d’une volonté artiste, se levait de la forme ondulante et assouplie, une admirable statue d’un moment. […]

Et se laissant retomber sur le divan, elle reprenait son amoureux travail.

L’odeur doucement entêtante du bois de genévrier qui brûlait montait dans la chaleur de l’atelier: Manette recommençait cette patiente création d’une attitude, cette lente et graduelle réalisation des lignes qu’elle ébauchait, remaniait, corrigait, conquérait avec le tâtonnement d’un peintre qui cherche l’ensemble, l’accord et l’eurythmie d’une figure. L’heure qui passait, le feu qui tombait, rien ne pouvait l’arracher à cet enchantement de faire des transformations de son corps comme un Musée de sa nudité; rien ne pouvait l’arracher à l’adoration de ce spectacle d’elle-même, auquel allaient toujours plus fixement ses deux pupilles pareilles à deux petits points noirs dans le bleu aigu de ses yeux. (305)

This masterful description of Manette underlines how, in the pose, she manages to self-create and to transform herself into a work of art. Her narcissistic love for her body is not paralyzing but rather stimulating and her creative ardor and concentration are likened to the work of the painter. Although the vocabulary of painting permeates the passage, Manette is sans brush and easel, rather modeling herself into a living, breathing Galatea, and a “mock” painting with the mirror.

Manette is a protean figure that can assume different shapes and fulfill different roles. Coriolis is puzzled by her as a person and by an existing portrait of her by one of her previous lovers. Coriolis detests this picture of Manette not only because it is from another man’s hand but also because he does not like what he sees:

C’est avec cette expression qu’elle était peinte dans un portrait qu’elle avait voulu apporter chez Coriolis; singulier portrait, où, dans un caprice d’artiste, son premier amant l’avait représentée en gamin, une petite
Manette is thus portrayed as a young, impertinent, and violent boy. This image of a young boyish woman recalls Manet’s *Le Fifre* in which Victorine stands as a young boy playing flute (minus the violent aspect). Most importantly, Manette’s portrait foreshadows Manette’s harmful ways and Coriolis is disturbed by “une ressemblance mauvaise, une expression de quelque chose qu’il n’aimait pas à voir” (297). In a way, Coriolis is presented with the picture of Dorian Gray itself, that is, a canvas in which the ostensible marks of cruelty and evil-doing appear explicitly, reflecting the sitter’s true self. Coriolis chooses to ignore the fact that “the portrait is an effect of the painter’s interpretation of the soul” (Berger 109) and to counter it, he sets out to make his own portrait of Manette. After several attempted sketches which he reprises from time to time, he never manages to achieve one, rather falling into a contemplation of his mistress:

Il s’arrêtait dans l’entrain et la chaleur d’un travail, allait à une des ébauches, la posait sur la traverse du chevalet et la palette à la main, la tête un peu penchée de côté sur son appuie-main, il regardait Manette. […] Coriolis voulait peindre cette tête, cette physionomie, avec ce qu’il y voyait d’un autre pays, d’une autre nature, le charme paresseux, bizarre et fascinant, de cette sensualité animale que le baptême semble tuer chez la femme. Il voulait peindre Manette dans une de ses attitudes à elle, lorsque, le menton appuyé au revers de sa main posée sur le dos d’une chaise, le cou allongé et tout tendu, le regard vague devant elle, elle montrait des coquetteries de chèvre et de serpent, comme les autres femmes montrent des coquetteries de chatte et de colombe.

—Ah! toi, —finissait-il par lui dire en reposant sa palette,—tu es comme la fleur que les faileurs d’aquarelles appellent le ‘désespoir des peintres!’ (297-8)
Coriolis finds himself unable to portray Manette the way he would like to because as herself, she cannot be grasped, she is unfixable, untranslatable. Furthermore, he does not want to paint her the way he knows her to be, disturbed as he is by the traits of her animality, the reminiscence of her Jewishness. Coriolis’s portrait of Manette does not come into being through his brush but through the Goncourts’ pen. Their description details Manette’s face with her “yeux bleus mystérieux,” her “né délicatement busqué,” and her “bouche, froncée et chiffonnée, légèrement retombante aux coins et dédaigneuse” (297). Through their écriture artiste, but translating Coriolis’s observation of Manette, the Goncourts fill in the blank of Coriolis’s canvas, providing us, through his discerning eyes with the picture he cannot complete.

Manette is thus offerte in the text the way she is not in painting: her body is an object of contemplation, but it is also a sort of extension of the canvas as it actively collaborates in the creative process. She is the ‘stuff’ of writing as well, being the object of numerous masterful descriptions throughout the novel. The Goncourts use every opportunity to describe Manette through different angles, lights, even as though through a microscope with the minutest details of her skin, mirroring and enacting Coriolis’s obsession. Manette permeates the writing of the novel, starting with the eponymous title. Yet, although we seem to know Manette too well, we do not know her at all. She is a point of resistance in the text, one that never gets overcome by Coriolis or the Goncourts. Mostly, she is a constructed fiction, a protean figure: she is what the characters, the Goncourts, and the readers want her to be.
Before the transformation triggered by pregnancy and motherhood, Manette was the key ingredient for the success of Coriolis’s *Le Bain turc*. As previously said, he had started this large painting hoping to show to the public and the critics that he was a complete artist, able to bring together color and line in an innovative way. Conceived as a statement of his art, Coriolis struggles to give shape to his female figure in the exact way he seeks until Manette comes along. The life of *Le Bain turc* is reminiscent of *La Belle-Noiseuse* in the sense that it undergoes several transformations, but Coriolis’s consists of erasure rather than layering.

Following is the first descriptive passage of the painting:

Le décor de sa scène était un *Bain turc*. Sur la pierre moite de l’étuve, sur le granit suant, il plia une femme, sortant comme de l’arrosement d’un nuage, de la mousse de savon blanc jetée sur elle par une négresse presque nue, les reins sanglés d’une *foutah* à couleurs vives. La baigneuse, sur son séant, se présentait de face. Elle était gracieusement ramassée et rondissante dans la ligne d’un disque: on l’eût dite assise dans le C d’un croissant de lune. Ses deux mains se croisaient dans ses cheveux, au bout de ses bras relevés qui dessinaient une anse et une couronne. Sa tête, penchée, se baissait mollement, avec un chatouillement d’ombre, sur sa gorge remontée. Son torse avait les deux contours charmants et contraires de cette attitude penchée: pressé d’un côté, serré entre le sein et la hanche, il se tendait de l’autre, déroulait le dessin de son élégance; et jusqu’au bout des deux jambes de la baigneuse, l’une un peu repliée, l’autre longuement allongée, l’opposition des lignes se continuait dans l’ondulation d’un balancement. Derrière ce corps ébauché, sorti de la toile avec du pastel, Coriolis avait massé au fond des groupes de femmes qu’on entrevoyait dans une buée de vapeur, dans une aérienne perspective d’étuve rayée de traits de soleil qui faisaient des barres. (258)

Coriolis’s painting (still a sketch when it is described) offers a rather cliché image of the Orient through the figure of the *baigneuse*. The painting seems governed by the elongated shape of the woman’s body that creates the movement of the composition. *Le Bain turc* differs from Coriolis’s previous efforts in the sense that the scene is indoors.
rather than outdoors so that the effects of the sunlight are tainted by the studio setting. The title of the painting along with the location in the Turkish bath are of course reminiscent of Ingres’s *Le Bain turc* (1862; Figure 20). The voyeuristic aspect of the scene—the medallion shape of the painting places the spectator in the position of a voyeur peeping through a keyhole—combined with the groups of women bathers makes the *rapprochement* rather obvious. Coriolis’s central figure seems to be a mixture of Ingres’s *Grande Odalisque* (1814; Figure 21) and Chassériau’s *Toilette d’Esther* (1841; Figure 22) as Champeau suggests in the notes. Indeed, the elongated and crescent-shaped body of Coriolis’s canvas finds an echo in Ingres’s long, elegant figure. The position of the legs as well suggests a certain inspiration from her counterpart in Ingres; a notable difference being that in Ingres’s painting, the female figure is seen from the back, elegantly and sensuously turning her head to look at the spectator, while in Coriolis’s creation, the *baigneuse* is facing forward with her hands up in her hair. Chassériau’s *Toilette d’Esther* seems to have inspired this aspect of the painting. In Chassériau’s canvas, Esther is also accompanied by a black woman presenting her with soap on one side and an Oriental woman carrying an adorned vase on the other.

Coriolis’s painting, despite being an indoor scene, still manages to infuse some sunlight in the depiction of the groups of women in the foreground. The color palette mentioned (the pastel of the central figure and the “traits de soleil”) seems true to the Coriolis we know from his early works. Because this is a much more focused painting, with one central figure, the description necessarily revolves around the main nude and provides us with many details that were inexistent in the other depictions. The general effect then is not that of an advanced sketch, as it was for the first three paintings.
described—although this one is a sketch whereas the others were finished products—but rather that of a finished product with clear lines and delineations, plays of light and shade ("un chatouillement d’ombre") and a clear focus on one central character. Immediately following this ekphrasis, Coriolis, angry with Anatole’s positive review of the canvas, violently erases his baigneuse from the painting, complaining that he cannot find the right model for it.

After his collaboration with Manette and upon finishing his painting for the second time, Coriolis again receives positive feedback from his entourage: “‘C’était réussi, c’était superbe!... Il faisait chaud dans le tableau... De la vraie chair... admirable!’” (301) The artist remains dissatisfied with the overall result, however. To reinforce this dissatisfaction, the Goncourts insert a short “tableau littéraire” where they show Coriolis outdoors watching Manette:

Quand il était dehors, s’asseyant dans ses endroits de soleil, il restait pendant des quarts d’heure les yeux sur un morceau de cou, un bout de bras de Manette, une place de sa chair où tombait un rayon. Il étudiait de la peau,—les mailles du tissu réticulaire, ce feu vivant et miroitant sur l’épiderme, cet éclaboussé splendide de la lumière, cette joie qui court sur tout le corps qui la boit, cette flamme de blancheur, cette merveilleuse couleur de vie, auprès de laquelle pâlit ce triomphe de chair, l’Antiope du Corrège elle-même. (301)

We understand here that what Coriolis perceives as the play of light on Manette’s skin is what he believes is lacking in his Bain turc. He is interested in reproducing the flesh in its most intimate and biological details; but not just the flesh: rather, the effects of light on the skin, the interaction between the rays of the sun and the flesh. The scientific side of his experiment is visible through the use of biological vocabulary ("tissu réticulaire," “épiderme”) and the strange partitive article in the expression “Il étudiait de
la peau” as though he had put a piece of Manette’s skin under a microscope, submerged in a ray of sunlight.

In order to obtain the luminosity he seeks, Coriolis changes the orientation of his studio from North—which was the norm at the time—to a Southern exposure. The chapter ends with Coriolis who “quelques jours après, […] reprenait le corps de sa baigneuse, d’après le corps de Manette, dans le jour du soleil” (303). This is the final version of the Bain turc, which Coriolis exhibits at the 1853 Salon and which is acclaimed by the public as well as the critics:

Ceux qui n’avaient voulu voir en lui qu’un joli ‘faiseur de taches’ étaient forcés de reconnaître le peintre, le dessinateur, le coloriste puissant, s’affirmant dans une toile dont les dimensions n’avaient guère été abordées, pour de pareils sujets, que par Delacroix et Chassériau. Tout le public était frappé de l’ensoleillement de ce corps de femme, d’un certain lumineux que Coriolis avait tiré de son dernier travail dans l’éclat du jour. (306)

In other words, what he felt was lacking in his first attempts, he repaired by changing the orientation of his studio, bringing a new light onto the canvas as well. What were the mere “traits de soleil” (258) of the sketch have become full-fledged “ensoleillement de ce corps de femme,” suggesting that Coriolis has managed to translate on canvas what he saw happening at a scientific level in his observation of Manette’s skin in the sun.

The critically-acclaimed Bain turc—the government buys it for the Musée du Luxembourg, that is, the museum of modern art of the time—marks the height of Coriolis’s art but also his downfall since he will never again gain as much critical success. But he has affirmed his talent and detached himself from other Orientalists, Decamps notably. Coriolis’s defense is fascinating in his insistence that his brand of
Orientalism is truer to reality than Decamps’s because, he believes, he experienced Asia Minor as an “artistic virgin,” ready to take in what he saw as opposed to Decamps who, he says,

n’est pas arrivé tout neuf devant la lumière orientale… Il n’a pas appris le soleil, là… Il n’est pas tombé en Orient avec son éducation de peintre à faire, avec des yeux tout à fait à lui… Il était formé, il savait… Il a vu avec un parti pris. […] Enfin, pour moi, quand il a été là, il ne s’est pas assez livré, oublié, abandonné… Il n’a pas assez voulu voir comment la lumière qu’il avait devant les yeux se faisait, et alors, pour avoir sa lumière plus vive, il a forcé, exagéré ses ombres… (234-5)

Coriolis thus suggests that Decamps’s picture of the Orient was influenced by his academic training whereas Coriolis’s formation occurred during his trip and allowed him to absorb its distinctive light and to create a color palette true to the hues of the place. Coriolis’s focus is on colors and light; especially brightening the color palette and using what he calls “lumière diffuse” (235), that is, a light that illuminates the painting and that recreates the “vaporisation continuelle… […] une évaporation d’eau de perles” (236) he had experienced first in Asia Minor.

THE MODERN

After his success with Le Bain turc, Coriolis remains idle for a long time—withdrawning to Barbizon but not producing any work there. In preparation for the 1855 Exposition Universelle, he shifts his focus from Orientalism to the representation of contemporary, Parisian subjects. The first painting of his exhibition is Un Conseil de révision whose central figure is a young male, nude, being examined by a surgeon. In the background are “les personnages du bureau, les uniformes, les habits noirs officiels, les
têtes des fonctionnaires” and “des fonds de foule” (426). In a way, this is a repetition of Le Bain turc with (clothed) men and in a modern, Parisian setting. The chair (flesh) is all masculine this time, with fragmented body parts, “des parties de corps superbes,” standing out here and there. This painting’s major achievement is to have allied in a significant way the nude with the clothed—perhaps a subtle stab at Manet by the Goncourts for Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe.

The second painting, described at length and in great detail by the Goncourts, is entitled Un Mariage à l’église:

Beaucoup de femmes étaient complètement retournées ou de profil, regardant les toilettes avec la vague émotion du mariage et de la messe sur la figure. Des jeunes filles maigres, des virginités séchées, pointaient çà et là. Du milieu de la légèreté des élégances, se levait, dans une couleur puissante et magnifique, un suisse tenant de la main gauche une hallebarde dont le fer de lance laissait pendre un ruban de satin blanc […]. Dans le chœur, comme dans une rose de lumière, se perdaient des enfants de chœur à ceintures bleues, à robes de dentelles, l’officiant en chasuble d’or, l’autel d’or, avec son petit temple, les chandeliers, les candélabres allumés et dont les feux montaient dans le scintillement criard des verrières modernes. Pour repousser à toutes ces splendeurs, un coin de bas-côté près du chœur rassemblait, au-dessous d’un tronc d’offrande, une vieille femme à genoux par terre, un bonnet sale et troué laissant voir ses cheveux gris […]; une mère du peuple […], et un tout jeune ouvrier […]. (427-28)

What is lacking in this otherwise very detailed and thorough ekphrasis is a description of the couple, barely mentioned in passing—”derrière les mariés” (427). The overall impression of this painting, as it is described, is that there is no hierarchy in the depiction of the assembled people. The old woman along with the other low-class people may clash by their ‘ugliness’ with the surrounding splendor, but their presence is on the same plane as the upper-class citizens of the painting. The figure of the “Suisse” might be the only one detaching itself from the rest through the apparent boldness of colors with

67 One can think here of Rembrandt’s The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp (1632).
which he is portrayed. In many ways, *Un Mariage à l’église* can remind one of Courbet’s Realist statement with *Un Enterrement à Ornans* (1850; Figure 23) which was thrashed by the critics because of this very lack of a clear hierarchy between the different components of the painting. Coriolis’s canvas is greeted with a mixed reception of indifference and indignation which the Goncourts wittingly convey through a pastiche of contemporary art criticism addressing the Realist and modern aspects of the painting:

Peindre de tels sujets, c’est manquer à la haute et primitive destination de la peinture, c’est descendre l’art à la photographie de l’actualité. A quels abîmes de ce qu’on appelle maintenant ‘le vrai contemporain’ veut-on donc nous entraîner? Supprimera-t-on dans la peinture l’intérêt moral, la perspective du passé, tout ce qui force l’esprit à s’élancer au-dessus de l’atmosphère commune? (429-30)

This very well could have been written with Courbet’s painting in mind, as these were the critiques he had to face with his Pavillon du Réalisme. Two issues are brought up by the anonymous critic: the lack of morality attributed to the depiction of the common people; and the lack of reference to the past, perhaps in the form of literary or biblical allusions meant to elevate the mind. Coriolis’s two paintings suffer from their proximity to Courbet’s Pavillon during the Exposition Universelle: the public and the critics confuse his brand of Realism, “travaillant à tirer de la forme typique, choisie, expressive des images contemporaines, le style contemporain” (429) and Courbet’s, whose Realism is, for them, entrenched in “la charlatanerie du laid” (428).

Coriolis tries his hand once more at the modern, this time in an outdoor setting with a beach scene. A lengthy description details every aspect of the composition of the painting, still a sketch at this point. A mixture of children, bathers, and young men and

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68 The Goncourts might have borrowed the motif of the beach from the painter Eugène Boudin as Champeau notes, whose numerous paintings of the beach at Trouville (*Sur la plage de Trouville* (1860); *La plage à Trouville* (1864); *Scène de plage à Trouville* (1867)) probably inspired Coriolis’s paintings.
women chatting in their fashionable dresses constitutes the population of the painting, which, like the two previous ones, seems to have no central focus. Several groups of people coexist and share the limelight, like the following bathers:

Là, sous le rose tendre et doux des ombelles voltigeant sur les visages, les poitrines, les épaules, étaient assises les baigneuses de Trouville. Le pinceau du peintre y avait fait éclater, comme avec des touches de joie, la gaiété de ces couleurs voyantes qu’harmonise la mer, la fantaisie et le caprice des élégances nouvelles de ces dernières années, cette Mode, prise à toutes les modes, qui semble mettre au bord de l’infini un air de bal masqué dans un coin de Longchamp. Tout se mêlait, se heurtait, les lainages bariolés de Pyrénées, les saute-en-barque aux caracos, les mantelets de dentelle noire à des vestes de jockey. (438)

Coriolis’s signature colors again seem to offer a unique blend of pastels and bright colors that liven the painting and that, strategically placed throughout the canvas, create an impression of “éclatement” of colors. The abundance of plurals and the interlocking of the various garments—“tout se mêlait”—once again underlines the lack of focus of the painting. There is, however, a distinct ambition here, that of representing fashion, “la Mode,” as the cultural phenomenon that it was. This becomes even more explicit as the Goncourts explain Coriolis’s ambition as follows:

Le peintre n’avait pas voulu seulement y montrer des costumes: il avait eu l’ambition d’y peindre la femme du monde telle qu’elle s’exhibe au bord de la mer, avec le piquant de sa tournure, la vive expression de sa coquetterie, l’osé de son costume, le négligé de sa robe et de sa grâce, l’espèce de déshabillé de toute sa personne. Il avait voulu fixer là, dans ce cadre d’un pays de la mode, la physionomie de la Parisienne, le type féminin du temps actuel, essayé d’y rassembler les figures évaporées, frêles, légères, presque immatérielles de la vie factice, ces petites créatures mondaines, pâles de nuits blanches, surmenées, surexcitées, à demi mortes des fatigues d’un hiver, enragées à vivre avec un rien de sang dans les veines et un de ces pouls de grande dame qui ne battent plus que par complaisance. (442)

Coriolis thus seeks to represent the modern Parisian woman in an almost anthropological way: as an elusive and ghost-like creature anchored in the modernity of
the moment and the place. Coriolis’s parcours is then one of reinvention: from his early Orientalist paintings culminating in *Le Bain turc*, to this beach scene in which the woman and her garment have become the emblem of the modern. It is noteworthy that since Coriolis’s loss of Manette as a model, the female nude has disappeared from his repertoire, at least until then, to be replaced by the male nude (in *Le Conseil de révision*) or by clothed women and men.

**PAINTING AND IMMORALITY**

Coriolis’s view of the beach at Trouville is met with a wall of indifference from both the public and the critics. Enraged and discouraged, he throws himself into another large-scale canvas, violently delineating a new sketch through a “travail sabré” (443) out of which slowly appear the contours of a young woman and an old man. The violence and intensity of the work continue as Coriolis locks himself up for fifteen days before finally sharing his work in progress with Anatole and Manette:

Dans un arrangement qui rappelait un peu le *Pâris* et l’*Hélène* de David, se voyait un couple de grandeur nature: une jeune fille au bord d’un lit, sur laquelle se penchait, avec des bras de désir, la passion d’un vieillard. D’un côté, une lumière, le matin d’un corps, la première innocence de sa forme, sa première splendeur blanche, une gorge à demi fleurie, des genoux roses comme s’ils venaient de s’agenouiller sur des roses, un éblouissement comme l’aurore d’une vierge, une de ces jeunesse divines de femmes que Dieu semble faire avec toutes les beautés et toutes les puretés comme pour les fiancer à l’amour d’une autre jeunesse; de l’autre, imaginez la laideur, la laideur morale, la laideur de l’argent, la laideur des cupidités basses et des stigmates ignobles […] ce que la caricature physiologique de notre temps a saisit au vif, élevé à la grandeur, presque à la terreur, par la puissance du dessin. (444)

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This classically composed canvas offers on the one hand the image of “le satyre bourgeois” (444) and on the other, the young, innocent-looking, and yet unrepentant prostitute. The light becomes a metaphor for youth and for the apparent innocence of the prostitute who is depicted through soft (“rose”) and bright tones (“éblouissement”). The divine aspect Coriolis grants his female figure reminds one of course of his awe before Manette’s body and his apprehension of her as a “véritable et divin être d’art” (272). This painting reads as a possible parable of Coriolis’s personal story with Manette: he the older man living with the much younger Manette, obsessed both physically and artistically with her body.

The immorality with which he was charged with *Un Conseil de révision* and *Un Mariage à l’église* is driven to an extreme in this sketch to the point that it is judged (by the narrative voice) not merely obscene but “douloureux et blasphématoire” (445). The immorality carries out into the texture of the painting:


The violence is thus palpable not only through the content but also through the execution, as though the brush had become a weapon. The infernal atmosphere stems from the dominant red colors, the image of the fire (“les flambées”), and the stuffiness of the interior marked by the serpentine drapes. With this canvas, Coriolis’s modern streak seems to have regressed to a more classical depiction of demonic and perverse love with
the disguised presence of the satyrs—"le satyre bourgeois"—and the Greek Furies—"Erinyes." The composition is also strikingly antithetical and uncharacteristic of Coriolis’s typically unfocused paintings. In this spontaneous, enraged, and violently driven canvas, Coriolis’s unconscious, and the remnants of his classical education perhaps, pour out to "crie[r] la souffrance de ses impressions, de ses nerfs, de ses idées, de ses révoltes, de ses dégoûts, de tout ce qu’il a senti, souffert, dévoré d’amertume au contact des êtres et des choses" (445-6).

This is perhaps the best portrait of Manette Coriolis ever painted because the young prostitute appears "tranquille, attendant, passive, sans se détourner. Sa peau, sans dégoût, ne reculait pas; et elle paraissait livrer, avec l’habitude d’un métier, avec une indifférence ingénue, le rayonnement et la pudeur de tout son corps à ces yeux de viol." (444-45). This depiction of a young, unrepentant prostitute fits the way Manette has been portrayed in the novel, cold and indifferent, aware of her actions and yet unapologetic or unashamed.

Just like the previous paintings, this untitled canvas becomes a succès de scandale and for over a month, various potential buyers and admirers come to take a look at the sketch. However, Coriolis never finishes it, “sa fièvre […] passée” (446), and it ends up turned against a wall, a hidden reminder of his artistic instincts and potential.

COLOR MADNESS

After this unfinished and yet singularly potent and powerful depiction of the old man with the young prostitute, Coriolis falls ill and withdraws to the South of France where, under Manette’s control, he produces charming, commercial views of the region.
The novel relates the slow degradation of the artist at the hands of a woman whose sole interest is money and who steers the painter away from his innovative ideal toward the banality of the painting for the masses. Of these commercial paintings, the text does not provide any ekphrasis, as though they were not really art. Upon his return from Montpellier, Coriolis learns of an auction of some of his works—essentially works that Manette disliked and which she had him sell off—among them, *Le Conseil de révision*. Much publicized thanks to a young art critic who recognized Coriolis’s works as the manifestation of modernity, the auction brings a remarkable fifteen thousand francs for the painting. 70 Reinvigorated by the seeds of success and equally infuriated with letting Manette deviate him from his ambition, Coriolis proceeds to an *autodafé* of his remaining works so that their potential revenue does not profit Manette. In other words, his artistic conscience has returned but he is still unable to personally extract himself from the presence and influence of a woman who has managed to enslave his mind. This destructive *autodafé* calls a parallel with Frenhofer’s own burning of his works at the end of “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu.” However, in Balzac’s tale, it could be interpreted as Frenhofer’s recognition that his masterpiece will never be understood—at least by the artists of his own time. In *Manette Salomon* however, it is both an act of vengeance against Manette and an act of self-proclamation of the value of his work.

It is worth noting that, although Coriolis becomes mad, he does not die or commit suicide (as is the case for Frenhofer and Claude in Zola’s *L’Œuvre*). The closest self-destructive act he perpetrates against himself is this *autodafé*, which is both an

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70 This spontaneous and sudden defense of Coriolis by a young debuting art critic is reminiscent of Zola’s championing of Manet as a way to advance his own literary agenda. Bowie also identifies Baudelaire as a possible reference since the poet “launched his literary career in 1845 with an account of the Salon of that year” (18).
acknowledgment of his artistic talent and an acknowledgment of his personal failure. Despite the ongoing strain of Manette’s manipulations and the degeneration of his work, Coriolis never stops working and continues to try to produce the revolutionary painting he always wished to create. One day he leads Anatole to the window of an art merchant to show him his latest exhibit: “Anatole regarda, et après quelques compliments vagues, il se dépêcha de se sauver: il lui semblait qu’il venait de voir la folie d’un talent” (530).

The reader is left with this ‘unknown masterpiece’ as the Goncourts do not—or cannot—describe it. How is one to translate visual madness into words? Rather than evoking a chaos of colors à la Balzac, the Goncourts launch into a lengthy explanation of Coriolis’s color madness and of the fact that “[s]es yeux étaient presque fous” (530).

Toward the end of the novel, Coriolis has thus fallen victim to a hypersensitivity of the eye wherein the brightest colors appear dull to him. His painting suffers insofar as, in order to palliate this monotony, this “momification des couleurs” (531), he finds it necessary to exaggerate colors:

La lumière, il était arrivé à ne plus la concevoir, la voir, que dans l’intensité, la gloire flamboyante, la diffusion, l’aveuglement de rayonnement, les électricités de l’orage, le flamboiement des apothéoses de théâtre, le feu d’artifice du grésil, le blanc incendie du magnésium. […] Il cherchait partout de quoi monter sa palette, chauffer ses tons, les enflammer, les brillanter. Devant les vitrines de minéralogie, essayant de voler la Nature, de ravir et d’emporter les feux multicolores de ces pétifications et de ces cristallisations d’éclairs, il s’arrêtait à ces bleus d’azurite […]. (531)

The “éblouissement” characteristic of his early works gives way to a sort of hallucinatory state whereby Coriolis sees light only in the most intense circumstances, such as a bolt of lightning. This color blindness/madness forces him to magnify the intensity of his palette
and to seek the rarest hues and declensions of colors that push to the extreme his early experiments with colors and light.

Coriolis has been unanimously considered by literary critics as a failure because of this very disease of the eyes. I would like to offer an alternative and more favorable reading of Coriolis’s madness by first turning to a parallel the Goncourts draw between the late Coriolis and the late Turner:

[I]l descendait un peu de cette hallucination du grand Turner qui, sur la fin de sa vie, blessé par l’ombre des tableaux, mécontent de la lumière peinte jusqu’à lui, mécontent même du jour de son temps, essayait de s’élever, dans une toile, avec le rêve des couleurs, à un jour vierge et primordial, à la Lumière avant le déluge. (531)

The Goncourts, as Champeau remarks in her notes, mistake the title of Turner’s work and probably allude to Shade and Darkness—The Evening before the Deluge (1843; Figure 24) and/or its counterpart Light and Color (Goethe’s Theory)—The Morning after the Deluge—Moses Writing the Book of Genesis (1843; Figure 25). The “hallucinated” quality of these two Turner paintings does not take away from their artistic merit: they offer a clear emphasis on the study of light (per their titles) and they represent an early move toward an abstract form of art since there is no real distinguishable figure. Regarding this comparison, Crouzet notes that:

[Coriolis] finit par cette toile qui n’est même plus décrite, qui est la convulsion pathologique de son talent, la caricature de son ‘luminisme’; les Goncourt l’assimilent aux dernières œuvres de Turner, que sans doute ils ne connaissent que par ouï-dire et qu’Edmond admirera plus tard. (35)

This reference to Turner, which serves as the ekphrasis of the painting, indicates that there is no way to turn Coriolis’s experimental canvas into words. The Goncourts’ heretofore successful écriture artiste falls short when it comes to tackling a nonfigurative

71 Crouzet for instance evokes “la mort d’un génie” (35).
painting. We know this work through the comparison with Turner and Anatole’s words according to whom it is “la folie d’un talent” (530). One needs to remember, however, that Coriolis never trusted Anatole’s judgment and therefore, why should we? We find ourselves in the same situation as in “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu” where, as a reader, we want to believe Porbus and Poussin’s account that La Belle-noisette is a failure. Just as there is a (subconscious) appeal and desire to follow Porbus and Poussin’s judgment, critics and readers of Manette Salomon give Anatole’s reading too much credit. What “saved” Frenhofer was the picture of the perfect foot which, despite being the dysfunctional element of the painting, allowed Poussin and Porbus to recognize the “hidden” value of the work and the critics to make plain Frenhofer’s genius. I argue that Coriolis’s genius is to have forgone “the foot,” to have moved past the mimetic element that would have provided a key to the painting and a point of departure for an ekphrasis of the painting. No foot, no description, in the Realist-Naturalist novel of the Goncourts.
Chapter Four: *L’Œuvre* and the Politics of Ekphrasis

What a fine book he could have written, not only a historical record of a very original movement in art, but also a “human document,” [...] if, in *L’Œuvre* he had taken the trouble simply to relate what he had seen and heard in our reunions and our studios; for here he actually happened to have lived the life of his models. But, fundamentally, Zola did not give a darn about portraying his friends as they really were, that is to say, to their advantage. (Renoir qtd in Rewald 167-8)

It is impossible to delve into *L’Œuvre* without first situating it in the context of Zola’s corpus and career. The fourteenth installment of the Rougon-Macquart series, *L’Œuvre* was meant to be a “roman qui aura pour cadre le monde artistique,” a “tableau de la fièvre d’art de l’époque, de ce qu’on nomme la décadence et qui n’est qu’un produit de l’activité folle des esprits. Physiologie poignante d’un tempérament d’artiste à notre époque et drame terrible d’une intelligence qui se dévore elle-même” (Brady 151) as Zola presented it to his editor Lacroix in 1869,72 some seventeen years before its publication. Zola’s novel caused a rift with his painter friends, as exemplified by the Renoir quotation and by the well-known fact that Cézanne ended his boyhood friendship with Zola after reading the novel.

The polemical and critical aspects of the novel are central to understanding the text. Zola indeed conceived Claude Lantier, his protagonist, a tormented artist, as part Cézanne, part Manet. In the “Ebauche,” the preliminary notes that accompany each of his novels, he states that Claude is “le génie incomplet, sans la réalisation entière: il ne manque que peu de chose, il est un peu en deçà ou au-delà par sa physiologie; et j’ajoute qu’il a produit quelques morceaux absolument merveilleux: un Manet, un Cézanne

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72 Zola conceived this idea six years after Manet’s breakthrough at the Salon with *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1863) and *Olympia* (1863); and three years before Monet’s *Impression: Soleil levant* (1873), the painting that inspired the name for the movement.
dramatisé; plus près de Cézanne” (“Dossier” 434-5). Both Brady and Niess, in their respective seminal studies of the novel, have established the keys for each character and shown that although Claude is primarily Cézanne and Manet, he nevertheless possesses a dash of Claude Monet and André Gill. I am not interested here in dwelling on the clés of the novel but *L’Œuvre* being a roman à clés and a roman à thèse, such correspondences are necessary to understand the underlying political tone of the novel. In other words, Zola’s privileged position as friend, champion, and critic of the Impressionists informs the “agenda” of the text and one must consider it.

*L’Œuvre* has often been considered a fictionalized summary of Zola’s aesthetic ideas, a sort of continuation of his journalism and the expression of his final judgment on the Impressionists. Brady has noted that “en général on le trouve moins intéressant comme fiction que comme document historique” (119). Still a struggling young journalist and novelist when he started writing about Manet and the Impressionist school, Zola’s supportive and polemical (yet critical) articles in their defense granted him a platform from which to “further his own reputation and proclaim his own aesthetic principles as much as those of the artist” (Lethbridge 153). Zola’s art criticism was anything but neutral, espousing Baudelaire’s recommendation that “la critique doit être partiale, passionnée, politique” (Baudelaire *Ecrits sur l’art* 141). Indeed Zola was passionate and vocal in his opposition to academic painting and mocked the status quo such acclaimed and uncontested masters as Cabanel and Bouguereau represented. Opposing what he called “la nouvelle manière en peinture” of Manet and the Impressionists to the stuffiness of academic precepts, Zola appreciated the new movement’s desire to do away with
idealizing nature, admired its emphasis on the modern, its revolutionary study of light, and its painters’ efforts to record what they saw as they saw it.

Zola recognized a kinship of artistic endeavor with the Impressionist movement. In *Le Roman expérimental*, where he lays the foundation of his own Naturalism, he states that:

> le romancier est fait d’un observateur et d’un expérimentateur. L’observateur chez lui donne les faits tels qu’il les a observés, pose le point de départ, établit le terrain solide sur lesquels vont marcher les personnages et se développer les phénomènes. Puis, l’expérimentateur paraît et institue l’expérience. (*Roman* 7)

Zola defines his concept of the Naturalist novel based on the scientific study of facts and experimenting with them as though in a chemical reaction. The parallel with his analysis of the Impressionist work is quite explicit:

> Aujourd’hui nos jeunes artistes ont fait un nouveau pas vers le vrai, en voulant que les sujets baignassent dans la lumière réelle du soleil, et non dans le jour faux de l’atelier; c’est comme le chimiste, comme le physicien qui retourne aux sources, en se plaçant dans les conditions mêmes des phénomènes. (“Le naturalisme au Salon” *Ecrits* 420)

The scientific terminology used in *Le Roman expérimental* recurs here with the comparison between artists and chemists or physicists. Zola’s sense of kinship between Impressionists and Naturalists can further be seen through his use of the term “naturalistes” to refer to them in his Salon of 1880, while they already went by the title “Impressionists.”

However much he publicly championed the movement, Zola was also genuine in his reservations about the group; his main bone of contention revolving around their

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73 Zola was a follower of French experimental scientist Claude Bernard, whose theory of the determinism of the social milieu, as well as the need to establish critical observation for all experiments, greatly influenced Zola’s theories of Naturalism in art.
technical innovations. He did not approve of what he considered to be hasty sketches—
"Selon moi, on doit bien saisir la nature dans l’impression d’une minute; seulement, il
faut fixer à jamais cette minute sur la toile, par une facture largement étudiée" (Ecrits
420). In other words, Impressionism is simply not Naturalist(ic) enough. In The Visual
Novel, Berg explains that “Zola saw that the task of naturalism was to recognize this
momentary impression, since it was scientifically “true,” and then focus it, through a
dynamic representation of the temporal sequence in the visual act, into a more solid and
detailed perception of reality” (Visual 193). Impressionism stops at the subjective
whereas Naturalism transforms the impression through the creative process. Zola’s
criticism of Impressionism consequently stems in large part from his own Naturalist
beliefs and L’Œuvre suffers from Zola’s didactic intentions, which operate at four
different levels in the novel.

First, Zola, enacting the rivalry of the paragone, or rivalry between the arts,
introduces the character of Sandoz, his spokesperson in the text, an aspiring novelist
whose hard work, pragmatism, and talent bring him success in the course of the novel.
Zola pits Sandoz, a Naturalist, against Claude, whose idealism overshadows his own hard
work and talent. Second, throughout the novel, Zola portrays Claude and the group of
artists he leads as lacking the skill and stamina necessary to successfully achieve the
revolution they started because of an absence of leadership and the lack of an artistic
statement to embody their ambition. What Zola says of the Impressionists in his art
criticism reappears in L’Œuvre almost word for word as is apparent in the juxtaposition
of the following quotes:

les efforts s’éparpillaient, les nouvelles recrues se contentaient d’ébauches,
d’impressions bâclées en trois coups de pinceaux; et l’on attendait
l’homme de génie nécessaire, celui qui incarnerait la formule en chefs-d’œuvre. (L’Œuvre 241; my emphases)

Le grand malheur, c’est que pas un artiste de ce groupe n’a réalisé puissamment et définitivement la formule nouvelle qu’ils apportent tous, épars dans leurs œuvres. La formule est là, divisée à l’infini; mais nulle part, dans aucun d’eux, on ne la trouve appliquée par un maître. Ce sont tous des précurseurs, l’homme de génie n’est pas né. On voit bien ce qu’ils veulent, on leur donne raison; mais on cherche en vain le chef-d’œuvre qui doit imposer la formule et faire courber toutes les têtes. Voilà pourquoi la lutte des impressionnistes n’a pas encore abouti; ils restent inférieurs à l’œuvre qu’ils tentent, ils bégayent sans pouvoir trouver le mot. Mais leur influence n’en reste pas moins énorme, […] ils imposent peu à peu aux Salons officiels la formule encore vague qu’ils appliquent. (“Le Naturalisme au Salon” Écrits 422-3; my emphases)

This is the gist of the thèse of L’Œuvre: Claude’s inability to produce a masterpiece that would confirm him as an “homme de génie,” and that would validate and bring cohesiveness to the movement he attempts to build. L’Œuvre thus extends Zola’s art criticism to the fictional art form of the novel. Although some critics (Niess for instance) argue against interpreting L’Œuvre as a critique of the Impressionist movement, I believe it quite impossible, on the contrary, not to keep Zola’s “agenda” in mind when reading the novel.74

Another way in which the paragone is identifiable is in Zola’s own Naturalist experiment where he chooses a painter to embody artistic failure. The son of L’Assommoir’s Gervaise, Claude is plagued with a “lésion de ses yeux” (72)—that is, of the most important organ for a painter—which leaves him literally paralyzed at times and which adds to his already existing artistic struggles. Finally, Zola opposes his own art to

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74 John Rewald, biographer of Cézanne, relays an anecdote by George Moore, friend of Degas and Manet, who recalls a soirée during which Zola is asked to discuss whether Claude Lantier is talented. Moore relates that Zola “was concerned to defend the theory of his book—namely that no painter working in the modern movement had achieved a result equivalent to that which had been achieved by at least three or four writers working in the same movement, inspired by the same ideas, animated by the same estheticism” (qtd in Rewald 167).
that of Claude, proposing poetic and innovative descriptions of Paris while Claude is unable to produce a painting of the capital. Paris thus becomes the “battlefield” of the *paragone*, where Zola’s aesthetic clashes with Claude’s.

In this chapter, I would like to address the psychological aspect of the novel, *L’Œuvre* being primarily concerned with the struggles and the labor of the artist. Second, I will discuss the degrees of ekphrasis present in the novel and see how ekphrasis impacts the narrative fabric of the text. Finally, I will examine the question of vision in terms of mediation and unmediation and investigate Zola’s own experiments with vision and viewpoint.

**CLAUDE, MADNESS, AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE ARTIST**

*L’Œuvre* follows in the footsteps of Balzac’s “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu” and the Goncourts’ *Manette Salomon*, even though Zola would not admit his debt to his predecessors. The novel emulates the triangular relationship of Balzac’s tale between the artist (Frenhofer/Poussin), the flesh-and-blood woman (Gillette), and the painted creation (Catherine). It also brings to the fore the paradigm of the “femme fatale” present in *Manette Salomon*, transferring it to the painted woman created by the artist (the Femme of the final painting). A common thread between these three artists lies in their quest for the absolute: to create a live woman on canvas (Frenhofer); to create and possess this live woman (Claude); and to radically rethink and experiment with color (all three painters). *L’Œuvre* follows the pattern of the artist gone mad. For Claude, madness looms as soon as he finds the motif of the Ile de la Cité with which he becomes obsessed. He embodies his obsession with the Cité into a female nude figure (I will call her “Femme figure”)) that
becomes the focal point of his final painting. Claude ends up committing suicide in front of his unfinished work, realizing the impossibility of his ambition.

As in Balzac’s tale, Zola pits love against art. Christine, a young orphan destined to lead a quiet life as the lectrice of an elderly widow, falls in love with Claude and sacrifices her stable future for her passion. Christine appears to me to be a Gillette with a voice, a sacrificial figure who chooses her fate when she stands by the artist she loves, hoping he will eventually abandon his all-consuming art for their love. Christine is conceived of as a male fantasy; she is the perfect combination of innocence and lust, as her portrait reveals: “Le haut était d’une grande bonté, d’une grande douceur […]; seulement, le bas gâtait ce rayonnement de tendresse […]. C’était comme un coup de passion, la puberté grondante et qui s’ignorait, dans ces traits noyés, d’une délicatesse enfantine” (32). Her passionate side bursts forth during the idyllic three months she spends with Claude at the beginning of their relationship, when they flee to Bennecourt, in the countryside of Paris, after the failure of Claude’s Plein Air at the Salon. Christine reveals herself as this “chair de passion, une de ces chairs sensuelles, si troublantes, quand elles se dégagent de la pudeur où elles dorment” (184-5). Before his relationship with Christine, Claude used to reject all women, wary and suspicious of them, exhausting his passion and sexual desire in desiring the painted women of his canvases instead: “Ces filles qu’il chassait de son atelier, il les adorait dans ses tableaux, il les caressait et les violentait, désespéré jusqu’aux larmes de ne pouvoir les faire assez belles, assez vivantes” (68). But with Christine, for a short period of time, Claude finally finds the fulfillment he had been seeking for so long, as he is finally able to consummate his passion:
“cette tendresse dont il épuisait autrefois le désir dans ses œuvres, ne le brûlait plus que pour ce corps vivant, souple et tiède, qui était son bien” (185).

In a fusional way, Claude and Christine live for each other, sharing every minute of their day, filling their time with boating parties, strolls, and peaceful moments at home—all of which ends when Christine gets pregnant and can no longer partake in their daily activities. During this blissful period, Christine is, however, not as she may seem to be. In fact, it seems to me that between Christine and the Femme he paints, Claude oscillates between the same extreme. Indeed, at Bennecourt, Christine dominates their relationship:

Au lit, le matin, c’étaient ses bras ronds, ses jambes douces qui le gardaient si tard, comme lié par des chaînes, dans la fatigue de leur bonheur; en canot, lorsqu’elle ramait, il se laissait emporter sans force, ivre, rien qu’à regarder le balancement de ses reins; sur l’herbe des îles, les yeux au fond des yeux, il restait en extase des journées, absorbé par elle, vidé de son cœur et de son sang. Et toujours, partout, ils se possédaient, avec le besoin inassouvi de se posséder encore. (185; my emphasis)

Christine brings fulfillment to Claude’s desires but his situation of being as though “chained,” lost in reveries watching her, reminds one of his behavior with the Femme. What I find particularly striking in this passage is the context of the boat on a river, which might subtly echo the resurgence of this motif in Claude’s final painting, a canvas depicting the Ile de la Cité with the Seine in the middle and the nude woman standing on a boat. These experiences with Christine might have shaped his final vision, casting Christine in the role of the initial femme fatale.

In this short interval at Bennecourt during which Claude has ceased to paint, Christine becomes all powerful, leaving Claude “absorbé par elle, vidé de son cœur et de son sang,” that is, in a similar state as he will be with the Femme. At the end of the novel,
when Christine finally confronts him about his relationship with the Femme, she tells him “ose dire qu’elle ne t’a pas envahi membre à membre, le cerveau, le cœur, la chair, tout! Elle te tient comme un vice, elle te mange” (415). In other words, the Femme possesses him the way Christine initially possessed him. Claude is thus always in the “claws” of a woman, whether a real one or a painted one, and this inherent weakness, combined with his artistic struggle, lead to his destruction.75

Like Frenhofer, Claude’s demiurgic impulse pushes him to try to produce life resulting in self-inflicted torment: “Ah! cet effort de création dans l’œuvre d’art, cet effort de sang et de larmes dont il agonisait, pour créer de la chair, souffler de la vie! Toujours en bataille avec le réel, et toujours vaincu, la lutte contre l’Ange!” The study of Claude’s “physical and mental suffering, the sheer torture, even the martyrdom involved in creation” dominates the novel, more than the study of aesthetic problems, as Zamparelli underlines (155). Claude’s intermittent periods of despair and diligent, positive work, his fits of rage against his failed paintings, stabbing or burning canvases, form an essential aspect of the narration, perhaps more than the ekphrases of his paintings or his discourses on art. Claude spends his time undoing and redoing, endlessly dissatisfied with the result. Working compulsively, he does not know when to stop, exhausting himself in the process: “Que voulait-il faire, maintenant que ses doigts raidis lâchaient le pinceau? Il ne savait pas; mais il avait beau ne plus pouvoir, il était ravagé par un désir furieux de pouvoir encore, de créer quand même. Et, s’il ne faisait rien, il resterait au moins, il ne quitterait pas la place” (76). Claude’s acharnement constitutes a

75 Zola here falls prey to the very traditional paradigms of soul/spirit, mind/body, male/female, dualisms that are in strong opposition to his scientific claims.
major obstacle to the artistic process and the more he works on a painting, the more doubts overcome him and prevent him from moving forward.

As Zamparelli notes, art in *L’Œuvre* is “nothing less than a disease, a curse, an obsession, in short a real monomania” (145). Claude, along with Bongrand—a well-respected and celebrated painter, the “patriarch” of the group in a way—and Sandoz, suffer from this Romantic conception of art as so powerful that it consumes the artist’s life, who lives only for it and forsakes everything else. Claude takes this to the extreme, devoting himself to art but also refusing to acknowledge the limitations of this “lutte contre l’Ange.” Indeed, Bongrand and Sandoz acknowledge that they are hypocrites because they produce works that are incomplete; Bongrand says that “Autant partir que de s’acharner comme nous à faire des enfants infirmes, auxquels il manque toujours des morceaux, les jambes ou la tête, et qui ne vivent pas” (436) to which Sandoz echoes: “Oui, il faut vraiment manquer de fierté, se résigner à l’à-peu-près et tricher avec la vie…” (436). Claude’s suicide, by contrast, is the desperate admission that the complete realization of one’s ambition is an impossible task.

When the young Sandoz exposes his theories and describes his novelistic projects at the beginning of the novel, he voices the idea of “le projet d’une genèse de l’univers en trois phases” (63) but he immediately feels the immensity of the endeavor, “cherch[ant] un cadre plus resserré, plus humain, où il ferait pourtant tenir sa vaste ambition” (64). He settles for the study of a family through a series of novels (a not so subtle clin d’œil to Zola’s own Rougon-Macquart cycle). Sandoz is painfully aware that creating requires making concessions and that grand ambitions rarely come true. Claude, on the other
hand, refuses this compromise and gives free range to his need for “des besognes colossales” (250); he is plagued by a totalizing impulse:

Ah! tout voir et tout peindre! […] Avoir des lieux de murailles à couvrir, décorer les gares, les halles, les mairies, tout ce qu’on bâtira, quand les architectes ne seront plus des crétins! […] ce ne sont pas les sujets qui manqueront… […] tous les métiers en branle; et toutes les passions remises debout, sous le plein jour; et les paysans, et les bêtes, et les campagnes!... On verra, on verra si je ne suis pas une brute! J’en ai des fourmillements dans les mains. Oui! toute la vie moderne! (64; my emphases)

Claude’s ambition démesurée consists in wanting to see and paint everything, trying to totalize the modernity of the world in his paintings. He pursues the same attitude regarding women: “il préférait l’illusion de son art, cette poursuite de la beauté jamais atteinte, ce désir fou que rien ne contentait. Ah! Les vouloir toutes, les créer selon son rêve, des gorges de satin, des hanches couleur d’ambre, des ventres douillets de vierges, et ne les aimer que pour les beaux tons” (296; my emphasis). Claude falls victim to his own immoderation and unrealistic ambition to paint it all. His final canvas marks the culmination of this totalizing impulse as he tries to include this “tout” of Paris on one canvas.

Claude eventually becomes mad, gradually falling into a deep state of hallucination, as we shall see later. The first step of this madness is the abandonment of his neo-Naturalist theories, that is, of the foundation of his aesthetic program: a general brightening of the palette, a more accurate and varied use of color, and the choice of modern subject matter—all this drawn from the direct observation of nature. At the beginning of the novel, the young artist exclaims:

Est-ce que en art, il y avait autre chose que de donner ce qu’on avait dans le ventre? est-ce que tout ne se réduisait pas à planter une bonne femme devant soi, puis à la rendre comme on la sentait? est-ce qu’une botte de
Here is Claude’s (neo-Naturalist) theory: no matter how trivial the subject matter, it is worthy of representation, as long as it is painted through direct observation and mediated by one’s personal vision of it—that is, not according to predetermined ideas on what a carrot should look like in nature or on canvas.

In the course of the novel, Claude goes through several phases: neo-Naturalism in *Plein Air*, neo-Impressionism in the Bennecourt paintings, neo-Realism in the first canvases of Paris, and Symbolism in the final painting of the Ile de la Cité. As madness begins to overcome him, he starts departing from his initial theories, turning away from direct observation and a scientific approach to art in particular. His incursions into science quickly turn into esoteric practices and mysticism. From simple superstitions like painting from left to right, Claude’s failing mental health plunges him into the most bizarre beliefs. For instance, he orders replicas of Delacroix’s triangular shaped knife and Courbet’s “couteau à palette” while he had until then tried to emancipate his work from their influence. He further goes to the extreme of proscribing oil in his paint, using instead “des solutions d’ambre, du copal liquide, d’autres résines encore qui séchaient vite et empêchaient la peinture de craquer” (301). He also adopts a specific technique whereby “répudiant le flot d’huile, la coulée ancienne, il procédait par des touches successives, béjoitées, jusqu’à ce qu’il arrive à la valeur exacte” (301). He combines this pseudo-scientific technique with his painter friend Gagnière’s own pseudo-scientific
theory of complementary colors, a method of establishing variations of color by positioning them one next to the other in order to produce a variation. Unfortunately, this method, along with Claude’s superstitions and his “lésion de ses yeux qui l’empêchait de voir juste” begins affecting his vision and the execution of his work. As the novel progresses, Claude’s “originalité de notation, si claire, si vibrante de soleil” turns into an exaggeration of color, a “renversement de toutes les habitudes de l’œil, des chairs violâtres sous des cieux tricolores”. In other words, Claude suffers from his own version of Corioliis’s “folie de l’œil” which takes him away from neo-Naturalism, places the Impressionist technique of “complementary colors” along with “folies,” and points him toward Symbolism.

Claude’s worsening condition can be traced to his exhibition of *L’Enfant mort*, the painting of his dead son Jacques. Jacques, only twelve years old, dies a monster, his head having grown exponentially, resulting in a grotesque appearance reflected in Claude’s canvas. As he observes his work at the Salon—where it has been received thanks to his friend Fagerolles’ help—all he sees is

> une confusion de chairs, la carcasse échouée de quelque bête informe! Etait-ce un crâne, était-ce un ventre, cette tête phénoménale, enflée et blanchie! Et ces pauvres mains tordues sur les linges, comme des pattes rétractées d’oiseau tué par le froid! Et le lit lui-même, cette pâleur des draps, sous cette pâleur des membres, tout ce blanc si triste, un évanouissement du ton, la fin dernière! (355)

All that Claude has been able to *enfanter* have been monsters, whether his flesh-and-blood son or his own creations. Claude’s most Realist painting, *L’Enfant mort*, is a monster itself, deviating from his otherwise colorful works. The overall white tone and

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76 Zola had received a letter from the painter Léo Gausson explaining to him the theory of complementary colors and this passage is loosely based on his explanations.
pallor of the painting is symbolical of both the child’s lifelessness but also of Claude’s impossibility to fulfill his artistic ambition. One of the few paintings he manages to finish and the first and only one received at the official Salon, *L’Enfant mort* should mark Claude’s long-awaited success but instead, becomes a corollary of his failure, bringing no reaction from the public—“Non, plus rien, pas même un crachat au passage: c’était la mort” (355).

There is, however, one domain in which Claude is successful: the art of sketching. His studio walls are covered with masterful esquisses—of Plassans, his boyhood region, and various academies and studies that make him proud and that bring evidence of his talent, “[qui] annonçaient un grand peintre, doué admirablement” (61). One sketch for *Plein Air* is described as “une ébauche, jetée d’un coup” with “une violence superbe, une ardente vie de couleurs” (48) and one of the Ile de la Cité painting is referred to as “une ébauche magistrale, une de ces ébauches où le génie flambe” (285). Claude’s genius thus lies in the initial stages of the creative process; as the narrator acknowledges: “C’était sa continuelle histoire, il se dépensait d’un coup, en un élan magnifique; puis, il n’arrivait pas à faire sortir le reste, il ne savait pas finir” (285).

At the end of the novel, upon Claude’s death, Bongrand laments to Sandoz that: “Je ne connais de lui que des ébauches, des croquis, des notes jetées, tout ce bagage de l’artiste qui ne peut aller au public… Oui, c’est bien un mort, un mort tout entier que l’on va mettre dans la terre!” (428) while Sandoz adds: “Il ne laisse rien” (428). The contempt for the art of sketching that lies at the heart of *L’Œuvre* must stem from Zola’s own distaste for it. Monet, who experimented very much with sketching, fell in Zola’s disgrace because of it:
M. Monet a trop cédé à sa facilité de production. Bien des ébauches sont sorties de son atelier, dans des heures difficiles, et cela ne vaut rien, cela pousse un peintre sur la pente de la pacotille. Quand on se satisfait trop aisément, quand on livre une esquisse à peine sèche, on perd le goût des morceaux longuement étudiés; c’est l’étude qui fait les œuvres solides. (Zola “Le Naturalisme au Salon” Ecrits sur l’art 426)

Zola’s harsh judgment of Monet’s aesthetics ironically parallels the kind of criticism Claude’s work is subjected to in L’Œuvre where “ces petits fignoleurs de l’Ecole et du journalisme l’ont accusé de paresse et d’ignorance, en répétant les uns à la suite des autres qu’il avait toujours refusé d’apprendre son métier” (428). Zola may be more generous with Monet and grant him talent but he discards Monet’s artistic program, his desire to elevate sketch as a worthy form of painting. Given this perspective then, Claude’s masterful ébauches in L’Œuvre carry no other intrinsic value than being a proof of his aborted talent.77

I should now like to turn to Claude’s talent and aesthetic, as it is transposed visually on his canvases and textually through ekphrasis.

EKPHRASIS AND CONDENSATION

L’atelier, il est vrai, continuait de l’effarer un peu. Elle y jetait des regards prudents, stupéfaite d’un tel désordre et d’un tel abandon. Devant le poêle, les cendres du dernier hiver s’amoncelaient encore. Outre le lit, la petite table de toilette et le divan, il n’y avait d’autres meubles qu’une vieille armoire de chêne disloquée, et qu’une grande table de sapin, encombrée de pinceaux, de couleurs, d’assiettes sales, d’une lampe à esprit-de-vin, sur laquelle était restée une casserole, barbouillée de vermicelle. Des chaises dépaillées se débandaient, parmi des chevalets boiteux. Près du divan, la bougie de la veille traînait par terre, dans un coin du parquet, qu’on devait balayer tous les mois; et il n’y avait que le coucou, un coucou énorme,

77 Interestingly, this art of sketching was celebrated in the Goncourts’ Manette Salomon and was characteristic of many of Coriolis’s paintings. We will also recall Edmond de Goncourt’s own aesthetic program to “trouver des touches de phrases semblables à des touches de peintre dans une esquisse” (qtd in Hartzell 109).
enluminé de fleurs rouges, qui parût gai et propre, avec son tic-tac sonore. Mais ce dont elle s’effrayait surtout, c’était des esquisses pendues aux murs, sans cadres, un flot épais d’esquisses qui descendait jusqu’au sol, où il s’amassait en un éboulement de toiles jetées pêle-mêle. Jamais elle n’avait vu une si terrible peinture, rugueuse, éclatante, d’une violence de tons qui la blessait comme un juron de charretier, entendu sur la porte d’une auberge. Elle baissait les yeux, attirée pourtant par un tableau retourné, le grand tableau auquel travaillait le peintre, et qu’il poussait chaque soir vers la muraille, afin de le mieux juger le lendemain, dans la fraîcheur du premier coup d’œil. Que pouvait-il cacher, celui-là, pour qu’on n’osât même pas le montrer? Et, au travers de la vaste pièce, la nappe de brûlant soleil, tombée des vitres, voyageait, sans être tempérée par le moindre store, coulant ainsi qu’un or liquide sur tous ces débris de meuble, dont elle accentuait l’insouciable misère. (34-35; my emphases)

So we are introduced to Claude’s studio, the locus of creation, and to his art, through Christine’s eyes and emotions. The description is organized according to her centers of interest. As a stereotypical woman, she first assesses the untidiness of the place from the ashes in front of the stove to the leftover candle and the dust on the floor. She then takes note of the motley assortment of items gathered on the table: a mixture of dirty dishes, brushes, and color tubes. The furniture attests to the modesty of the painter’s condition—“des chaises dépaillées” and “des chevalets boiteux”—as well as his seeming carelessness regarding the comforts of daily life. This passage introduces us to Claude’s studio but also to Claude’s art and Christine’s feelings and emotions regarding Claude’s painting. Shape our initial reading of the young artist’s work. Christine’s unease before what she calls “une si terrible peinture, rugueuse, éclatante, d’une violence de tons qui la blessait” makes the reader a little uneasy and prone to see Claude’s art as brutal in color and execution rather than innovative and creative. Additionally, Christine’s curiosity regarding the mysterious painting turned against the wall commands our attention. This passage weaves Christine’s viewpoint with the narrator’s, who provides information she
could not have known—the fact, for instance, that the painting is turned against the wall every night so that Claude can take a fresher look at it in the morning.

The oddness of this passage lies in the evocation of the material presence of painting in the studio. Mixed with everyday items as is the case with the objects on the table, art seems to run free within the confines of the studio. The sketches on the walls are frameless, as though uncontained, and are said to be flowing freely to the floor in a fluid, cascading movement. From the fluidity of the “flot,” the canvases materialize into a solid “éboulement,” as though they were rocks piling up on the floor. It is difficult to picture this messy arrangement where canvases are thrown casually onto the floor. The chaos associated with Claude’s studio calls to mind the description of Porbus’s studio in “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu,” where sketches and studies “couvraient les murs jusqu’au plafond” (21). In the case of Porbus, the flow of paintings is upward whereas for Claude, they cascade downward. Another essential difference in the two artists’ studios is that classic objects abound in Porbus’s studio whereas Claude is rather surrounded by the banality of everyday life—his ordinary, shabby furniture for instance or the dirty dishes on the table. At the beginning of his career then, Claude seems grounded in reality, in the reality he wishes to convey in his paintings.

The last sentence of the passage offers a poetic rendition of the sunlight in the studio. The image of the “nappe de brûlant soleil” that “voyageait” and “coulait” ainsi qu’un or liquide” reminds one of the fluid movement of the “flot d’esquisses.” Both art and nature, through the symbolic image of the sun, cohabit and move freely in the studio, blurring the boundaries between life and art. We later learn that some of these sketches are of Plassans, Claude and Sandoz’s birthplace in the South of France—and Zola’s own
boyhood region of Aix. One time, after Sandoz has posed for the male figure of Claude’s 

*Plein Air*, the two friends start reminiscing about Plassans, and Claude’s sketches bring their memories to life:

In this passage, all of Claude’s sketches of Plassans merge into one condensed, encompassing canvas. “Une ardente vie de couleurs” (48) animates this description with blues, greens, whites, and reds dominating the color scheme. The blazing reddishness of the scenery—”côteaux brûlés, couleur de rouille, les champs calcinés”—renders the intensity of the sun and the severity of the drought. Despite the seeming desolation due to the lack of water and the heat, Zola’s poetic prose manages to create an appealing tableau of the region with such charming images as the “moutonnement des petits oliviers grisâtres” and the “dentelles roses des collines.” The “vagues de pierre” “roulant à
l’infini” bring a liquid quality to a mostly rocky landscape. What could be negative elements, the drought, the chaos of this “désert farouche,” turns into poetry under Zola’s pen: thus, the Vallon de Repentance emerges from the otherwise burnt fields with the “fraîcheur d’un bouquet;” while the pines are beautifully described as “pleur[ant] leur résine sous le grand soleil.”

After reading this passage, one can wonder what one has just read: an ekphrasis of a series of sketches or a description of Plassans? Indications of place, “Là, ici, plus loin,” along with the use of active verbs, “s’étendait, ouvrait, se desséchait, pleuraient, tournaient,” make this passage a dynamic tableau, one that animates itself, in a way enacting the freedom nature and art enjoyed in the confines of Claude’s studio (the “flot d’esquisses” cascading to the floor, the sun “coulant comme un liquide”). Indeed, here, as then, the boundaries between art and life are again blurred as one seems to be transported to these Plassans locales the way Claude and Sandoz are, forgetting that one is in fact reading the ekphrasis of Claude’s sketches. In one paragraph, Zola illustrates

Many paintings by Cézanne depict these same places where both writer and painter grew up; the Jas de Bouffan for instance was the summer house of the Cézanne family and appears in numerous works by the artist. Claude’s patchwork of sketches combines the motif and color scheme of some of Cézanne’s landscapes of Aix, most of which, interestingly, postdate the publication of L’Œuvre. In Forêt de rochers (1890s, Figure 26), whose landscape can be attributed either to the region of Aix or the Fontainebleau forest, the unruly combination of massive rocks and thin trees calls to mind the “immense chaos” of Claude’s works. Paysage rocheux, Aix-en-Provence (1887; Figure 27) lends itself to be described through the image of the “vagues de pierre” against a background of nearby hills. The overall grey tone of Forêt de rochers and yellowish grey of Paysage rocheux, however, contrast greatly with the abundance of color characteristic of Claude’s esquisses. In Route tournante en sous-bois (1902-6; Figure 28) and Tournant à Montgeroult (1899; Figure 29), the “vie ardente de couleurs” links Cézanne’s paintings and Claude’s earlier sketches. Cézanne’s paintings both focus on the main motif of a turning road, which appears in passing in the description of Claude’s sketches. In Route tournante en sous-bois, the road is depicted in an intense ochre color, delineating a skewed perspective line that ends in a sort of closed off circuit. The trees cast their straight, bluish shadows over the ochre of the road, as though designing stairs on the forest path. The majority of the painting is occupied by the tall, thin trees. The luscious foliage appears through very rough and broad patches of dark greens, sea greens, and yellow and lime greens. The same brushwork applies to the deep blue sky which pierces through the foliage but is almost indiscernible from it. Finally, at the very top of the painting are a few rectangles of sand color that might signify a few homes on top of the hills. In this painting, it is the trees that seem to “roul[er] à l’infini.” Whereas Claude’s sketches precede Cézanne’s works by a few years, the convergence of some of the motifs and the use of color is striking.
both Claude’s talent at producing forceful and evocative sketches and his own skill at generating dynamic and equally suggestive descriptions that function as tableaux and replace the paintings they are supposed to describe. Claude’s sketching techniques are not evoked once and neither is the medium of painting, which was omnipresent in the Goncourts’ ekphrases for instance. The only allusion to Claude’s actual sketches is in the introductory sentence that reads “c’était comme s’ils avaient eu, autour d’eux, les anciens horizons.” The expression “Comme si” acts as a trigger for the substitution of life for painting and Plassans comes to life in a way similar to Combray emerging from Proust’s cup of tea.

One technique that Zola uses in order to create his own tableau is that of condensation. Indeed, the Plassans “esquisses” are merged into one description that provides a quasi comprehensive view of the region. This condensation gesture might be interpreted as Zola’s own totalizing impulse, a desire to include it all but that succeeds because it is able to edit and select, whereas as we saw earlier, Claude includes without ever excluding anything. There is only one painting by Claude that successfully synthesizes his ambition. A cityscape of Paris, it is the last canvas of a cycle of three, which Claude submits to the Salon after his return to Paris from Bennecourt. During a rare period of serenity and self-confidence, Claude is able to produce works that meet his entourage’s approval and that signal a rediscovery of his roots in Le Ventre de Paris where he attempted several portraits of the working-class of Les Halles.^[79] In order to

^[79] During one of his strolls through Les Halles, Claude finds motifs for future paintings: “Là, à travers la rue, il trouvait un superbe sujet de tableau: les marchandes au petit tas sous leurs grands parasols déteints, les rouges, les bleus, les violets, attachés à des bâtons, bossant le marché, mettant leurs rondeurs vigoureuses dans l’incendie du couchant, qui se mourait sur les carottes et les navets” (Le Ventre de Paris 225) and also obsessed with the idea of painting Cadine and Marjolin. At the beginning of L’Œuvre, he
follow Claude’s evolution more clearly, it will be useful to review the three paintings of this cycle.

The first painting of this series offers a social commentary on poverty in Paris and depicts a young girl and a “voyou” eating stolen apples. This canvas, painted exclusively outdoors, is like “une porte ouverte sur la rue” thanks to the grimness and brutality of its colors—”la neige aveuglait, les deux figures se détachaient, lamentables, d’un gris boueux” (251-2). Because of the uncompromising reality he portrays, and the matching brutality of his facture, Claude is aware there is little chance for his canvas to be accepted by the Salon; yet, he refuses to compromise and tone down the intensity of the work.

The second painting Claude submits a year later is that of a Spring view of the square des Batignolles, which he begins outdoors but must finish in his studio resulting in a painting “moins rude, la facture [ayant] un peu de l’adoucissement morné qui tombait du vitrage” (252). His friends celebrate in advance his success but it turns out to be yet another rejection by the Salon. Finally, the last painting of this serene period focuses on “un coin de la place du Carrousel, à une heure, lorsque l’astre tape d’aplomb” (253). The evolution in these three paintings is quite evident from the Winter scene to the Spring scene, and finally the blazing sun of Summer:

tells Sandoz: “Tu sais, mon tableau des Halles, mes deux gamins sur des tas de légumes, eh bien! je l’ai gratté, décidément: ça ne venait pas, je m’étais fichu là dans une sacrée machine, trop lourde encore pour mes épaules” (60). Claude’s personality does not change from Le Ventre de Paris to L’Œuvre: he is constantly starting paintings and erasing them, subject to periods of hope and periods of despair. He does manage, however, to produce one Realist masterpiece in his early days at the Halles, declaring “c’est mon chef-d’œuvre. Je n’ai jamais rien fait de mieux” (247). This alleged masterpiece actually consists in creating a display of deli meats for his cousin’s delicatessen. Claude tells his friend Florent how he arranged all the pieces of meat along with jars and other objects in order to form a disturbing assemblage: “C’était barbare et superbe, quelque chose comme un ventre aperçu dans une gloire, mais avec une cruauté de touche un emportement de raillerie tels, que la foule s’attroupa devant la vitrine, inquiétée par cet étalage qui flamblait si rudement…” (247). In other words, this is Claude’s very first succès de scandale, caused by a troubling and disconcerting display of meats, the first and only masterpiece he will ever produce, not through painting but through the material handling of reality.
Il voulut le plein soleil, ce soleil de Paris, qui, certains jours, chauffé à blanc le pavé, dans la réverbération éblouissante des façades: nulle part il ne fait plus chaud, les gens des pays brûlés s’épongeant eux-mêmes, on dirait une terre d’Afrique, sous la pluie lourde d’un ciel en feu. Le sujet qu’il traita fut un coin de la place du Carrousel, à une heure, lorsque l’astre tape d’aplomb. Un fiacre cahotait, au cocher somnolent, au cheval en eau, la tête basse, vague dans la vibration de la chaleur; des passants semblaient ivres, pendant que, seule, une jeune femme, rose et gaillarde sous son ombrelle, marchait à l’aide d’un pas de reine, comme dans l’élément de flamme où elle devait vivre. Mais ce qui, surtout, rendait ce tableau terrible, c’était l’étude nouvelle de la lumière, cette décomposition, d’une observation très exacte, et qui contrecarrait toutes les habitudes de l’œil, en accentuant des bleus, des jaunes, des rouges, où personne n’était accoutumé d’en voir. Les Tuileries, au fond, s’évanouissaient en nuée d’or; les pavés saignaient, les passants n’étaient plus que des indications, des taches sombres mangées par la clarté trop vive. Cette fois, les camarades, tout en s’exclamant encore, restèrent gênés, saisis d’une même inquiétude: le martyre était au bout d’une peinture pareille. (253)

Whereas the previous two paintings were only evoked briefly, this last one benefits from a detailed, comprehensive description. This view of the Place du Carrousel consists in the foreground of various people set in the scorching heat and sun: a coachman and his horse, a group of passers-by, and a young, majestic woman. In the background are the Tuileries disappearing in a “nuée d’or” while the passers-by are reduced to “des indications, des taches sombres” (an image that, as we shall see, recurs in the descriptions of Paris throughout the novel). Claude’s renewed focus, the careful study of light and its effects, has been achieved here through a bold and disturbing use of primary colors—blues, reds, yellows—which result from Claude’s scientific approach to studying light effects. This particular painting seems to me to be a synthesis of all of Claude’s previous endeavors: on the technical side, it is reminiscent of the bold use of colors in the Plassans esquisses and the unusual touches of blues and yellows from the Bennecourt landscapes. (Christine had commented on the “régal de couleurs” found in the Bennecourt landscapes but also regretted the “terrain lilas” or “arbre bleu” that
disturbed her “idées arrêtées de coloration” (193). As far as the subject matter is concerned, the image of Paris under a blazing sun with its bustling life and golden light, is characteristic of the Paris Claude encounters every day and that appears through Zola’s various descriptions of the city. Claude has thus finally managed to merge, and condense, all of his previous technical innovations and motifs within his own vision of Paris, a totalizing gesture in and of itself. Moreover, he seems to have done so successfully since his friends remain enthusiastic. And yet, Zola takes this success away immediately, noting that this “étude nouvelle de la lumière, cette décomposition, d’une observation très exacte” is only a symptom of the madness to come, an impossible achievement that can only lead to martyrdom. The “étranglement systématique d’un artiste original” (252) in the stubborn rejection of his paintings by the Salon is thus as much the work of the jury as that of Zola who will not give a chance to Claude.

When the novel opens, Claude’s current endeavor is _Plein Air_, whose title is deceiving in the sense that he paints it exclusively indoors. The first description of the canvas is as follows:

> Un long silence se fit, tous deux [Claude et Sandoz] regardaient, immobiles. C’était une toile de cinq mètres sur trois, entièrement couverte, mais dont quelques morceaux à peine se dégageaient de l’ébauche. Cette ébauche, jetée d’un coup, avait une violence superbe, une ardente vie de couleurs. Dans un trou de forêt, aux murs épais de verdure, tombait une ondée de soleil; seule, à gauche, une allée sombre s’enfonçait, avec une tache de lumière, très loin. Là, sur l’herbe, au milieu des végétations de juin, une femme nue était couchée, un bras sous la tête, enflant la gorge; et elle souriait, sans regard, les paupières closes, dans la pluie d’or qui la baignait. Au fond, deux autres petites femmes, une brune, une blonde, également nues, luttaient en riant, détachaient, parmi les verts des feuilles, deux adorables notes de chair. Et, comme au premier plan, le peintre avait

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80 There are no ekphrases of the canvases from the Bennecourt period.
81 The discrepancy between Zola’s beautiful description of Paris and his negative assessment of Claude’s paintings already shows the political quality of ekphrasis in the texts.
eu besoin d’une opposition noire, il s’était bonnement satisfait, en y asseyant un monsieur, vêtu d’un simple veston de velours. Ce monsieur tournait le dos, on ne voyait de lui que sa main gauche, sur laquelle il s’appuyait dans l’herbe. (48)

Plein Air already contains within itself the motif of the female nude and the golden light, which will reappear in the final composition of the Ile de la Cité painting. Claude’s masterful sketch is evidence of his initial alacrity and strong beginning in the creative process. The scene is set in a clearing and combines three female nudes—two of them being in the background while the third one, a reclining woman, occupies the center of the composition—with one fully clothed man. The description follows the composition of the canvas: a tree alley on the left provides an area of darkness against the “ondée de soleil” that showers the rest of the painting. The wrestling women in the background form “deux adorables notes de chair” in the midst of the forest greenery whereas the central nude figure bathes in the golden rain. Finally, the fully clothed man in the foreground provides the necessary dark contrast.82

One can discern a speck of cynicism in the narrator’s comment that “le peintre [ayant] eu besoin d’une opposition noire, il s’était bonnement satisfait, en y asseyant un monsieur” (my emphasis), as though there were no logic or reason behind the artist’s

82 Claude’s Plein Air resembles various contemporary paintings by Manet and Cézanne. It is impossible to read the description of a female nude in a “trou de forêt” without thinking about Manet’s Déjeuner sur l’herbe (1863; Figure 14). Manet’s large painting depicts two fully clothed men sharing lunch with a nude woman. She is staring at us, unabashedly, unashamed of her nudity in the midst of these men. In the background is a woman bathing in the lake, wearing a light white dress, and seemingly playing with the water. The whiteness of the female figures, especially the nude one, against the dark greenery of the clearing and the dark garb of the two men offers a striking contrast, especially considering the fact that Manet has completely abandoned the technique of chiaroscuro. The figures then do not blend with their surroundings but rather stand out as though ready to be detached from it. Manet’s canvas was ill-received as the critics and the public mocked the sketchy quality of the painting and the lack of context of the subject matter. Claude’s painting plays with the same balance between the softness of the “pluie d’or” and the “deux adorables notes de chair” and the violence of the tones used. Indeed, the impression that emerges from both paintings, the fictional one and the real one, is that of a contradiction between the execution—lack of chiaroscuro, harsh contours, bold colors—and the lightheartedness of the subject matter—a casual luncheon, two women wrestling playfully.
choice other than the color contrast. Zola voices a similar opinion when he defends Manet’s *Olympia* (Figure 16): “Il vous fallait une femme nue, et vous avez choisi Olympia, la première venue; il vous fallait des taches claires et lumineuses, et vous avez mis un bouquet; il vous fallait des taches noires, et vous avez placé dans un coin une nègresse et un chat” (Zola *Ecrits* 161). Zola thus identifies a bit of carelessness in Manet’s composition and design, seeing Manet as a colorist rather than a storyteller. He portrays Claude in a similar fashion, as a painter for whom the picture speaks for itself and needs no outside historical or literary context or reference.83 When Sandoz tells Claude that “*Plein Air*, ça ne dit rien” (65), the latter retorts, “Ça n’a besoin de rien dire… Des femmes et un homme se reposent dans une forêt, au soleil. Est-ce que ça ne suffit pas?” (65)

Other ekphrases of the painting chronicle its evolution, or rather non-evolution, as each description records the still sketchy quality of the work—“ébauché entièrement” (64), “à peine indiquée encore” (65), “indiqués à larges coups,” “presque terminées” (118). Examining his work at the Salon des Refusés, Claude himself is able to discern the problematic elements of his canvas: the man in the foreground is “empâté” and the two wrestling women “restées trop à l’état d’ébauche, manquaient de solidité” (159). He remains nevertheless satisfied with the background and stands in awe before the figure of the female nude “[qui] lui apparaissait supérieure à son talent même, comme si un autre l’avait peinte et qu’il ne l’eût pas connue encore, dans ce resplendissement de vie” (160).

83 It is important to remember, however, that although Manet’s *Olympia* is a playful reprise of Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*. In the same way, *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, on which Claude’s *Plein Air* is loosely based, does not seem to offer any good explanation for the presence of the nude woman in the midst of fully clothed men but it makes a clear classical reference to Titian and Giorgione’s *Pastoral Concert* (c. 1509-10).
A few critics walking through the Salon have also noticed Claude’s innovations, one of them “qui s’arrêtait sans rire,” as well as “des peintres célèbres, surpris, la mine grave, le père Malgras, très sale, allant de tableau en tableau avec sa moue de fin dégustateur, tombant en arrêt devant le sien, immobile, absorbé” (164) and chief amongst them, Bongrand whose compliments make Claude proud. This positive feedback on Claude’s *Plein Air* is drowned, however, in the criticism and laughter it faces from the general public and the majority of critics at the Salon des Refusés. As expected, people are shocked by the incongruity of the subject matter—”c’était le sujet surtout qui fouettait la gaieté: on ne comprenait pas, on trouvait ça insensé, d’une cocasserie à se rendre malade” (161). But they are also troubled by and upset with the “bleuissement, cette notation nouvelle de la lumière” (161) that overwhms their sensitivity. For the reader of *L’Œuvre*, this “bleuissement” actually comes as a surprise as this particular characteristic of the painting had heretofore never been mentioned.

In that sense, one can consider the ekphrases of Claude’s paintings incomplete and summary (the series of three paintings Claude produces upon his return from Bennecourt are quite brief for instance) but also misguiding (or misguided). In the first ekphrasis of *Plein Air*, Claude’s temperament as a colorist is obvious in the painting’s peculiar “ardente vie de couleurs” (48) and his interest in a new study of light had been made implicit through the comment that he had arranged his composition through contrasts of light and shade. However, this light that had been evoked as a “pluie d’or” (48), a “frisson lumineux” (64) and a “nappe de soleil” (118) bears little relation to the “bleuissement” that characterizes Claude’s painting. Even Claude’s own critique of his work does not mention this trait while this is all the public sees: “les chairs sont bleues,
les arbres sont bleus, pour sûr qu’il l’a passé au bleu, son tableau!” (160) Is this not a matter of perception then, and of who sees the painting? Claude and Sandoz focus on the subject matter and color, Christine on the “réalités d’une hideur de monstres” in these “toiles abominables” (138-9), and the public sees blue. In other words, Zola does not provide us with a neutral view of Claude’s *Plein Air* but rather with several “critiques partiales, passionnées, politiques,” to borrow Baudelaire’s phrase. Each of these critiques allows him to highlight different facets of the painting. Zola also demonstrates in a concrete way the question of perception and reception of a work of art as each character sees what he or she is “trained,” or willing, to see.

Let us now turn to a detailed analysis of the politics of ekphrasis in the text.

**EKPHRASES OF PARIS: PARISIAN TABLEAUX VS. TABLEAUX OF PARIS**

After Claude’s return from Bennecourt to Paris, the city becomes his chief source of inspiration. He finds motifs and ready-made tableaux at every corner, seeing the capital as a giant canvas: “il découvrait des tableaux partout, la ville entière, avec ses rues, ses carrefours, ses ponts, ses horizons vivants, se déroulait en fresques immenses” (250). Even before Claude’s newly found inspiration, Zola uses the capital as the matter of his own descriptions, his own tableaux. As Leduc-Adine and others have noted, Paris is a character à part entière in the novel, coming to life through Zola’s descriptions, the city becoming the primary matter for both Claude’s obsession and Zola’s to some degree.84 (Zola wrote over fifty pages of preparatory descriptions of the city recording his

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84 Leduc-Adine quotes Marie-Claire Blancquart who suggests that “malgré une intrigue faiblement […] conçue, on se sent devant un roman fort […]. Que l’on remplace cette intrigue (“l’histoire” contée dans
own impressions during his walks and the importance of Paris throughout the Rougon-Macquart is undeniable\textsuperscript{85}). *L’Œuvre* opens and closes with views of Paris, and the tableaux of the city punctuate the narration.

Such views occur during Claude and Christine’s walks as the artist sees the young woman home to Passy after each of her visits. Paris looms as an auspicious presence in their nascent love, “les envelop[ant] de toutes les tendresses qui avaient battu dans ces vieilles pierres, au travers des âges” (129). In the course of a three-page description, Zola condenses the sites/sights of Paris the couple sees during their walks: Paris under different weather conditions and in the changing light of the late afternoon. Here is a segment of the description:

Par les jours de ciel clair, dès qu’ils débouchaient du pont Louis-Philippe, toute la trouée des quais, immense, à l’infini, se déroulait. D’un bout à l’autre, le soleil oblique chauffait d’une poussière d’or les maisons de la rive droite; tandis que la rive gauche, les îles, les édifices, se découpaient en une ligne noire, sur la gloire enflammée du couchant. Entre cette marge éclatante et cette marge sombre, la Seine pailletée luisait, coupée des barres minces de ses ponts, les cinq arches du pont Notre-Dame sous l’arche unique du pont d’Arcole, puis le pont au Change, puis le Pont-Neuf, de plus en plus fins, montrant chacun, au-delà de son ombre, un vif coup de lumière, une eau de satin bleu, blanchissant dans un reflet de miroir; et, pendant que les découpages crépusculaires de gauche se terminaient par la silhouette des tours pointues du Palais de Justice, charbonnées durement sur le vide, une courbe molle s’arrondissait à droite dans la clarté, si allongée et si perdue, que le pavillon de Flore, tout là-bas, qui s’avancait comme une citadelle, à l’extrêме pointe, semblait un château de rêve, bleuâtre, léger et tremblant, au milieu des fumées roses de l’horizon. (129-30)

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\textsuperscript{85} Etienne Brunet records that, statistically, the term “Paris” is the most frequent in all of the Rougon-Macquart series with 1507 occurrences, not including the names of specific quartiers and locales (in Leduc-Adine 167).
The passage opens up with the contrast of the two riverbanks of the Seine, one being exposed to the blazing light of sunset, the other already almost submerged in darkness. The Seine in the middle appears in a shimmer of light and as though striped by the “barres minces” of the bridges. The water, of “satin bleu,” whitens with the sudden patches of light that brighten each bridge. Areas of light and dark shape this vision of Paris whose design of “lignes,” “arches,” “courbes,” and “tours pointues” detaches itself against the background of the sky. As a finale, the ethereal Pavillon de Flore brings a note of blue against the pink background of the smoky sky. The ekphrastic quality of this description thus stems from the attention to contrasts of light and dark and colors and shapes. Zola offers his own version of the Goncourts’ poetic “tableaux littéraires,” where poetic prose substitutes itself for the allusion to the medium of painting.

The description follows the progress of Claude and Christine’s walk along their itinerary to produce a “travelling narratif” or “narration itinérante,” to use Henri Mitterand’s terms, where what is in motion is “l’origine même du regard” (“Inscriptions” 157). The narrator and the reader follow the protagonists along their promenade rather than simply witnessing their walk. But Paris is not just what is being observed; rather it seems that Paris is in movement at the same time as Claude and Christine are walking. Each element described is paired with a variety of active verbs and gerunds: the Pavillon “s’avancait” as opposed to Claude and Christine moving forward; the various bridges “montr[e]nt” the light and its reflection on the water; buildings and isles “se découpaient” (as opposed to “étaient découées”). As Henri Mitterand notes, the technique of the “travelling narratif” is akin to the cinematic device of the moving camera following
characters on screen, focusing on specific elements and slowing down or accelerating the rhythm, according to the desired effect.

The technique of the “travelling narratif” is complicated further by the fact that Paris itself is put in motion. This ekphrastic moment turns out to be an exercise in describing movement, a moving “vision” both in the sense of the character’s moving viewpoint and Paris itself being in motion. By having two moving entities, Zola creates a tableau vivant where the observer and the observed interact and react to each other, instilling a spark of life into what one usually considers still and motionless: the image. It also offers an example of a beautiful tableau of Paris, where Zola, through the motif of the shimmering Seine, provides a successful outcome to Claude’s “étude nouvelle de la lumière” (253) and embodying some of the characteristics that Zola explicitly criticizes.

A second Parisian tableau occurs during a particularly difficult period of despair and hopelessness for Claude who takes a walk with his artist friends in Paris, sharing their struggles and ambitions, conquered by the sites they see while on the Place de la Concorde:

“Ça, finit par déclarer Claude, ça, ce n’est pas bête du tout.”
Il était quatre heures, la belle journée s’achevait dans un poudroissement glorieux de soleil. A droite et à gauche, vers la Madeleine et vers le Corps législatif, des lignes d’édifices filaient en lointaines perspectives, se découpaient nettement au ras du ciel; tandis que le jardin des Tuileries étageait les cimes rondes de ses grands marronniers. Et, entre les deux bordures vertes des contre-allées, l’avenue des Champs-Elysées montait tout là-haut, à perte de vue, terminée par la porte colossale de l’Arc de Triomphe, béante sur l’infini. Un double courant de foule, un double fleuve y roulait, avec les remous vivants des attelages, les vagues fuyantes des voitures, que le reflet d’un panneau, l’étincelle d’une vitre de lanterne semblaient blanchir d’une écume. En bas, la place, aux trottoirs immenses, aux chaussées larges comme des lacs, s’emplissait de ce flot continu, traversée en tous sens du rayonnement des roues, peuplée de points noirs qui étaient des hommes; et les deux fontaines ruisselaient, exhalait une fraîcheur, dans cette vie ardente.
Claude, frémissant, cria: “Ah! Ce Paris… Il est à nous, il n’y a qu’à le prendre.” (96-7)

The expression “poudroïement glorieux” brings immediate poetic tension to the passage as the city is showered by the remnants of the sunlight. Particular attention is paid to the composition of the scene: the indications “à droite et à gauche,” “entre les deux,” and “en bas” signal the general positioning of the various elements. Paris seems to be drawing perspective lines into its depths through its heights—”lignes d’édifices,” “étageait les cimes rondes”—and its roads with the Champs-Elysées avenue that “montait tout là-haut.” The crowd flows in two opposite streams along the avenue which doubles all the elements of the cityscape: “les remous vivants” find an echo in “les vagues fuyantes,” while “le reflet” and “l’étincelle” complement each other. In addition, the rapid rhythm of the passage imitates the busy waves of traffic. The “points noirs qui étaient des hommes” calls to mind Monet’s black dots in *Boulevard des Capucines* (Figure 18) but Zola, a Naturalist, leaves no doubt as to what these dots represent—”qui étaient des hommes.” As in the previously quoted Parisian tableau, this description has managed to create a tableau vivant that celebrates the Parisian cityscape.

Claude’s words frame this passage and clearly indicate that what we see is what he sees and that he appreciates the artistic quality of the scene unfurling before his eyes. However, the description itself is completely detached from his vision: the absence of verbs of perception, coupled with the introducing statement “Il était quatre heures,” gives the passage an impersonal aspect. What could have been infused with Claude and his friends’ emotions is relegated to the “outside” of the description while Zola’s prose animates this vision, palliates the silence of the artist and substitutes itself for it. Zola, as in the other Parisian tableaux, has obliterated the presence of his protagonist(s),
proposing instead his own vision of the city in a beautiful and poetic tableau that one wishes were Claude’s. When Claude exclaims, “Ah! Ce Paris… Il est à nous, il n’y a qu’à le prendre,” he wishes he could translate on canvas what Zola has just successfully translated into words.

The final Parisian tableau I would like to analyze here condenses those we have analyzed so far. Framing the visit to the Salon des Refusés where Claude exhibits his \textit{Plein Air} are two short descriptions of the capital, the first one depicting an upbeat Paris, which echoes Claude’s hopeful heart for the success of his painting. The second description occurs as Claude and his friends exit the Salon, still imbued with the bittersweet failure of Claude’s \textit{Plein Air}. Sitting at a café, they observe Paris and its busy afternoon streets:

Quatre heures sonnaient à peine, le soleil oblique enfilait les Champs-Élysées; et, tout flambait, les queues serrées des équipages, les feuillages neufs des arbres, les gerbes des bassins qui jaillissaient et s’envolaient en une poussière d’or. […] Mais, après les quatre rangées de marronniers, au-delà de cette bande d’ombre verdâtre, ils avaient devant eux la chaussée ensoleillée de l’avenue, ils y voyaient passer Paris à travers une gloire, les voitures aux roues rayonnantes comme des astres, les grands omnibus jaunes plus dorés que des chars de triomphe, des cavaliers dont les montures semblaient jeter des étincelles, des piétons qui se transfiguraient et resplendissaient dans la lumière. (169)

This “panoramique” calls to mind the previously quoted evocations of the city. Zola blatantly recycles his vocabulary and expressions. The image of the “voitures aux roues rayonnantes comme des astres” parallels the “rayonnement des roues” (97) that animates the flow of cars in the streets. A similar golden light showers Paris through the “poussière d’or” (129, 169) or the “poudroiement glorieux du soleil” (96). Finally, the “points noirs qui étaient des hommes” (97) has become “des piétons qui se transfiguraient et
resplendissaient dans la lumière” (169). In one encompassing gesture, this short passage casts a triumphant view of Paris before Claude withdraws to the countryside.

Finally, I would like to compare the Parisian tableaux in *L’Œuvre* with a description of Paris that can be found in *Une Page d’amour* (1878), Zola’s novel of a passionate love story between a doctor and a widow. Just as in *L’Œuvre*, these views of the city serve as a leitmotiv and appear at crucial times in the course of the narration. In the very first description of Paris in the novel, Hélène, the protagonist, admires the cityscape that slowly takes shape before her eyes:

> En bas, sur la vaste place et sur les trottoirs, aux deux côtés de la Seine, elle distinguait les passants, une foule active de points noirs emportés dans un mouvement de fourmière; la caisse jaune d’un omnibus jetait une étincelle; […] et, le long des talus gazonnés, parmi d’autres promeneurs, une bonne en tablier blanc tachait l’herbe d’une clarté. […] Elle levait encore les yeux: là-bas, la coulée se séparait dans la débandade confuse des maisons; […] et les tours de Notre-Dame, toutes dorées, se dressaient comme les bornes de l’horizon, au-delà desquelles la rivière, les constructions, les massifs d’arbres n’étaient plus que de la poussière de soleil. Alors, éblouie, elle quitta ce cœur triomphal de Paris, où toute la gloire de la ville paraissait flamber. (89-90; my emphases)

As the italics show, not only does Zola recycle within his novel from one description to the next but also from novel to novel. Many of the images he had created eight years before for *Une Page d’amour* recur in *L’Œuvre*. One major difference between the Parisian tableaux in *L’Œuvre* and that of *Une Page d’amour* is that in the latter, Hélène’s perception of the city clearly and explicitly guides the composition of the scene as we follow the direction of her eyes. It is her act of viewing the city that is staged, 86

as much as the city itself—in a manner similar to Berthe Morisot’s *Femme et enfant au balcon* (1872; Figure 30). The narrator puts into words what Hélène is processing visually, adding the details that she does not know. (We later learn that although she can see Paris from her window, Hélène has never ventured into the city and would be hard-pressed to name any of its monuments.) The narration is thus a subtle mixture of Hélène’s vision and the narrator’s input but Hélène is in control of her visual experience and such indications as “elle distinguait; elle levait les yeux” make explicit the fact that we follow what she sees. By contrast, the descriptions in *L’Œuvre* are characterized by the seeming absence of the viewer—Claude mostly—who disappears in favor of an impersonal eye.

The Paris of golden lights that haunts *L’Œuvre* can be said to be, to some degree, Zola’s own obsessive vision of Paris that he applies and passes on to his fictional painter, Claude. Returning to the last Parisian tableau of *L’Œuvre*, the image that emerges from this “panoramique” is that of an exaggeration of light starting with the verb “flambait,” continuing with the haunting golden light springing from the “gerbes des bassins,” and ending with the pedestrians transfigured by the light. If Claude’s use of color and light in his painting of the Square des Batignolles, “contrecarrai[ent] toutes les habitudes de l’œil” (253), doesn’t Zola’s tableau achieve the same effect? Isn’t this Parisian tableau “terrible” as will be said of Claude’s own rendition of Paris under the blazing sun? It is indeed “terrible,” but no one in the text tells us so. This is the difference between the ekphrases of Claude’s works and the ekphrastic Parisian tableaux by Zola. The ekphrases possess a militant side that is absent from the “tableaux littéraires.” Indeed, the ekphrases of Claude’s paintings always already contain within themselves the criticism of the

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87 We will analyze this painting in detail further on in the chapter.
paintings and they could qualify as a subcategory of Zola’s journalistic art criticism. From the first description of Claude’s studio where Christine’s judgment of his work as “une si terrible peinture, rugueuse, éclatante, d’une violence de tons qui la blessait” (35), the text conditions our own judgment, shaping a preconceived notion of Claude’s art even before we have seen any example of it, and depicting his ambition as essentially impossible. In truth, Claude’s paintings are not so different from Zola’s visual tableaux but Zola passes a negative judgment on his fictional painter’s work whereas he lets his own productions shine. Moreover, by multiplying these visions of Paris throughout the novel, Zola palliates Claude’s powerlessness to produce these worthy tableaux and thus inscribes himself as the superior artist (this also occurs within the novel through Sandoz’s success as a writer).

Zola, then, has proven this thèse: he, a Naturalist writer, has succeeded where a (neo-) Impressionist has failed; Naturalism manages to take in the sight, and transform it through the creative (and yet scientific) process while Impressionists stop and transcribe their observation. However, the ekphrases of Claude’s paintings do not fail and manage to draw in the reader and to show Claude’s talent despite the obvious implicit bias that underlies them. The thèse of the novel, enacted in its politics of ekphrasis, is torpedoed by the poetics of ekphrasis that produce beautiful descriptions of skillful tableaux and that convey Claude’s misunderstood aesthetics.88 Let us now see in what other ways the narration attempts to stifle Claude’s aesthetics in the text.

88 I am grateful to Professor Barbara Woshinksy for raising this important point.
Une heure sonna, lorsqu’ils traversèrent les Champs-Elysées. C’était par une journée exquise, au grand ciel limpide, dont une brise, froide encore, semblait aviver le bleu. Sous le soleil, couleur de blé mûr, les rangées de marronniers avaient des feuilles neuves, d’un vert tendre, fraîchement verni; et les bassins avec leurs gerbes jaillissantes, les pelouses correctement tenues, la profondeur des allées et la largeur des espaces, donnaient au vaste horizon un air de grand luxe. Quelques équipages, rares à cette heure, montaient; pendant qu’un flot de foule, perdu et mouvant comme une fourmilière, s’engouffrait sous l’arcade énorme du Palais de l’Industrie. (149)

In this other Parisian tableau, where colors abound and offer a charming view of the city, what is again absent is the presence of an explicit viewpoint. Except for the personal pronoun “ils” of the first sentence, which indicates that we are following Claude and Sandoz, the description remains neutral, lacking verbs of perception and rather letting the image of Paris form before the reader’s eye. The tableau lives by itself as it were, independently from the characters’ experience. As we have seen throughout our analyses of ekphrasis and ekphrastic passages of the novel, the absence of a viewer is characteristic of descriptions in *L’Œuvre*. This is particularly unsettling in an art novel where the protagonist is an artist: the reader expects, as it happens in “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu” to some degree and certainly in *Manette Salomon*, that the painter’s eye will inform the descriptive passages, infusing them with he artist’s own artistic vision. This expectation is not fulfilled in *L’Œuvre*, as we will now examine more in depth.

I would first like to clarify the use of the terms vision and viewpoint and follow Berg’s definitions and analyses of the novel to do so. In *The Visual Novel*, Berg distinguishes between the notions of vision and viewpoint, defining viewpoint as “who sees what” (98) and as being determined by “the position (level, angle, and distance) from which the narrator/reader or viewer/spectator is meant to view the scene depicted by
the author/painter. Viewpoint is not a theme, but the form, mode, or manner by which visual motifs are presented” (99; author’s emphases). Viewing, on the other hand, is “the eye direction, expression, and contact of the characters within a scene” (98); in other words, viewing is an action, whereas viewpoint is a mode.

When a scene is perceived through a character (or several characters), Berg calls it a “dramatized viewer” (101). He illustrates this concept with Berthe Morisot’s *Femme et enfant sur le balcon* (1872; Figure 30), in which a woman and a child are standing on a balcony overlooking Paris. The woman is watching the little girl who, seen from the back, seems to be watching Paris. This painting is a cogent illustration of Berg’s argument as he shows that Morisot used an innovative approach that dramatizes / personalizes the viewpoint (104). Indeed, the painting offers several points of entry: the mother, whose imposing dark figure might attract the eye first; the little girl, who stands between the mother and the cityscape of Paris and is thus “a mediating viewer […] interposed between the implied viewer (who lurks invisibly behind the figures […]") and Paris” (104); and finally, Paris itself in the background. Berg concludes that “The spectator, confronting the ambiguity of multiple viewing possibilities, becomes a synthesizer, an “overseer,” whose vision encompasses that of the watcher (the woman), the dramatized observer (the child), and the implied viewer” (105). Berg also notes that “by placing the observers in a position analogous to the spectator’s, [Morisot] establishes a visual equivalence between Paris and viewing a painting” (105) thus staging the act of viewing as as important as the vision of Paris itself.

What is also striking in this painting and that Berg does not fully address is the fact that because of the angle of vision adopted, at a bias instead of straight, what the
child, our mediating viewpoint, sees is not completely available to the spectator. Indeed, the balcony’s thick post in the right-hand corner of the canvas bars the spectator’s vision, occluding what the little girl is actually looking at. Consequently, what *Femme et enfant au balcon* also calls into question is the possibility and plausibility of omniscience, the spectator being placed in the role of a synthesizer and yet not given all the information necessary for this new role. I would then say that the overseer is rather the implied viewer whose master position somewhere inside the room grants it access to a view of the balcony and of Paris. As Berg explains, this is “a simulacrum of viewpoint” (101), one that makes the spectator, and the character as well, believe they are in power, whereas the implied viewer/narrator retains actual control.

We have seen how the narrator remains in control of all descriptions, preventing Claude’s artistic vision from shaping the text. These narrator-controlled descriptions succeed in conveying a certain vision of the city notably while the ekphrases of Claude’s paintings point to his failure thanks to the infusion of a character’s judgment on the painting. We will now study the contrast between the seemingly unmediated descriptions (Zola’s “tableaux of Paris”) and mediated ekphrases and explore the concept and practice of “viewpoint” in the text.

The incipit of *L’Œuvre*, along with its ending, have probably been the most studied passages of the novel, the former because of the particular use of viewpoint and the image of the Parisian cityscapes it offers, and the latter because of its thematics—the artist committing suicide in front of his unfinished work. The novel begins with Claude’s stroll back to his apartment as he is caught in the midst of a storm:

Comme il tournait sur le quai de Bourbon, dans l’île Saint-Louis, un vif éclair illumina la ligne droite et plate des vieux hôtels rangés devant la
Seine, au bord de l’étroite chaussée. La réverbération alluma les vitres des hautes fenêtres sans persiennes, on vit le grand air triste des antiques façades, avec des détails très nets, un balcon de pierre, une rampe de terrasse, la guirlande sculptée d’un fronton. C’était là que le peintre avait son atelier, dans les combles de l’ancien hôtel du Martoy, à l’angle de la rue de la Femme-sans-Tête. Le quai entrevu était aussitôt retombé aux ténèbres, et un formidable coup de tonnerre avait ébranlé le quartier endormi. (21; my emphasis)

From the line of hotels along the Seine, the text focuses on the flash of lightning’s reflection on the water. The source of light is double: on the one hand, the lightning in the sky; on the other, the light on the surface of the river which in turn illuminates the buildings on Claude’s street. The rapidity of the lightning strike allows only for a few architectural details to be seen. Interestingly, the passage reads “on vit” rather than “Claude vit,” thus making impersonal and general what could have been Claude’s particular vision. Further on in the text, we learn that Claude is “aveuglé par la pluie” (22) and we are left to wonder whether he even saw anything at all.

On the other hand, as soon as the frightened and impressionable Christine appears in the text, detailed descriptions of Paris are offered to the reader. Here is the first one, as it appears to her in a flash of lightning:

Un éclair éblouissant lui coupa la parole; et ses yeux dilatés parcoururent avec effarement ce coin de ville inconnue, l’apparition violâtre d’une cité fantastique. La pluie avait cessé. De l’autre côté de la Seine, le quai des Ormes alignait ses petites maisons grises, bariolées en bas par les boiseries des boutiques, découpant en haut leurs toitures inégales; tandis que l’horizon élargi s’éclairait, à gauche, jusqu’aux ardoises bleues des combles de l’Hôtel de Ville, à droite jusqu’à la coupole plombée de Saint-Paul. Mais ce qui la suffoquait surtout, c’était l’encaissement de la rivière, la fosse profonde où la Seine coulait à cet endroit, noirâtre, des lourdes piles du pont Marie aux arches légères du nouveau pont Louis-Philippe. D’étranges masses peuplaient l’eau, une flottille dormante de canots et d’yoles, un bateau-lavoir et une dragueuse, amarrés au quai; puis, là-bas, contre l’autre berge, des péniches pleines de charbon, des chalands chargés de meulière, dominés par le bras gigantesque d’une grue de fonte. Tout disparut. (22-3)
This third flash of lightning seems to stretch in time as it yields a much longer and more thorough description than the first two obtained. The rain has also stopped, offering a clearer vision of the city to Christine through whose experience the description is now focused. The expression “ses yeux dilatés parcoururent” clearly indicates that we are following her vision. Christine’s emotions permeate the description of the cityscape as her fear is expressed through such terms as “effarement” and “ce qui la suffoquait.” The young woman’s lack of knowledge regarding this new city makes her mistake the different boats on the river for “d’étranges masses peupl[ant] l’eau.” Her summary assessment of Paris as “une cité fantastique” and “une apparition violâtre” unfurls into a flow of details focusing on the various colors of the buildings—“grises, bariolées, bleues, noirâtres,”—details of size and weight,—“petites,” “lourdes,” “légères,” “masses”—and composition of the scene—“de l’autre côté, à gauche, à droite, là-bas.” However, Christine’s panic and fright do not yield a confused and chaotic description of the city but rather a well-organized one, directed by her viewpoint but mediated and managed by the narrator who provides us with the information Christine cannot know: names of monuments and the specific names of the diverse boats. This particular passage thus subtly allies Christine’s vision and emotions with the narrator’s relevant information.

A second description of the cityscape, still through Christine’s eyes, occurs as yet another flash of lightning breaches the darkness:

Et, cette fois, elle venait de revoir la ville tragique dans l’éclaboussement de sang. C’était une trouée immense, les deux bouts de la rivière s’enfonçant à perte de vue, au milieu des braises rouges d’un incendie. Les plus minces détails apparurent, on distinguait les petites persiennes fermées du quai des Ormes, les deux fentes des rues de la Masure et du Paon-Blanc, coupant la ligne des façades; près du pont Marie, on aurait compté les feuilles des grands platanes, qui mettent là un bouquet de superbe verdure; tandis que, de l’autre côté, sous le pont Louis-Philippe, au Mail,
The vision of Paris from the previous description is developed here as the “cité fantastique” has become a “ville tragique dans l’éclaboussement de sang.” This passage is animated by the surprising touches of green through the trees, yellow from the apples, and red from the “braises” and the flaming barges. The unexpected present tense in “mettent là un bouquet de superbe verdure” actualizes and personalizes the description, as though someone were judging a painting. In this rhythmic and rapid enumeration of the various elements composing the scene, Paris appears in a confused and complex web of lines drawn by its streets and facades, and that signify the hustle and bustle of the city.

Even though the passage starts with the clear indication that we are still following Christine’s vision—“elle venait de revoir,”—it is almost immediately superseded by the more general “on”—”on distingua,” “on aurait compté,” “on vit.” But who is this “on” that overtakes both Claude’s and Christine’s vision? According to Berg, this additional viewer offers “a complementary perception of the scene” (141). Indeed, perhaps Christine, filled with fear and confusion, would have missed “les plus minces détails [qui] apparurent” that the overseeing “on” is able to provide for us. Berg concludes, regarding the Incipit, that the “on” assumes the viewpoint for descriptions involving details, reference points, linear precision, and mathematical accuracy. The three viewpoints add slightly different perspectives to the same scene—the impressionistic sensitivity of Claude, the emotive exaggeration of Christine, the precision of the narrator—resulting in a global perception by the reader, who
simulates the situation of the narrator as overseer or synthesizer of the scene. (142)

Although I agree with Berg’s characterization of the narrator’s viewpoint as adding “precision” and of Christine’s as bringing emotion to the description, I cannot agree with the idea that Claude grants “impressionistic sensitivity” to the passage. The overseeing “on” immediately takes over the short evocation of the “antiques façades.” When he meets Christine, she appears to him as “une grande jeune fille, vêtue de noir, trempée, qui grelottait de peur” (22) but the imprecision of this brief evocation of the young woman is not enough to characterize the passage as having “impressionistic sensitivity” as Berg does. I would rather argue that Claude is not given the chance to bring any specific quality to the descriptions of the Incipit as his vision is limited and impaired by weather conditions and the darkness.

As an artist, an “artiste flâneur, amoureux du Paris nocturne” (21), as he is referred to in the first paragraph of the novel, would it not have belonged to Claude to bring “details, reference points, linear precision,” in other words, some of the qualities of a painter, to these opening descriptions in the text? Henri Mitterand, in his own masterful analysis of this Incipit, suggests that the view of Paris through the intermittent flashes of lightning bears witness to “le regard déjà constructeur, reconstruit, interprétant, d’un artiste qui ne peut pas ne pas voir dans un paysage le motif d’une transposition picturale” (“Inscriptions” 152).89 Mitterand tries to reconcile this idea with Claude’s lack of input in the descriptions stating that although the viewpoint is sometimes Christine’s, hers is in

89 Mitterand extends his analysis to the moment when Claude and Christine have entered Claude’s apartment. Mitterand notes the cinematic quality of the Incipit and identifies three “sequences:” Claude’s course along the quai de Grève, his meeting and arguing with Christine, along with the cityscape description; and finally, the couple’s ascension to Claude’s apartment through the maze of the building’s staircase.
fact “travaillé, dans un curieux amalgame par le type de perception qu’en prendrait Claude” (152). But this is precisely my point: Claude’s “regard déjà constructeur, reconstruit, interprétant” does not exist in the beginning of the novel and rarely operates in the course of the text. In my view, Zola simply does not allow it to be. Berg and Mitterand, along with other critics of the text, are ready to assume that Claude’s artistic vision mediates the text while, in fact, it seems to me that it is enacted by Zola through the narrator. In the same way as the Parisian tableaux paint the cityscapes the reader wishes Claude had been able to produce, the Paris of the Incipit, mediated by Christine and the overseeing “on” of the narrator, are what we wish Claude had seen and mediated for us through his own artistic vision. Rather, Claude is characterized by his absence of vision.

Further in the text, at the pivotal moment when Claude finds the motif of the Ile de la Cité, seeing it as though he had never seen it before, his vision is still mediated and superseded by the narrator’s:

Une flamme était montée à son visage, ses yeux s’allumaient, il eut enfin un geste large.
“Regarde! regarde!”
D’abord, au premier plan, au-dessous d’eux, c’était le port Saint-Nicolas, les cabines basses des bureaux de la navigation, la grande berge pavée qui descend, encombrée de tas de sable, de tonneaux et de sacs, bordée d’une file de péniches encore pleines, où grouillait un peuple de débardeurs, que dominait le bras gigantesque d’une grue de fonte; tandis que, de l’autre côté de l’eau, un bain froid, égayé par les éclats des derniers baigneurs de la saison, laissait flotter au vent les drapeaux de toile grise qui lui servaient de toiture. Puis, au milieu, la Seine vide montait, verdâtre avec des petits flots dansants, fouettée de blanc, de bleu et de rose. […] En-dessous, la Seine continuait, au loin; on voyait les vieilles arches du Pont-Neuf, bruni de la rouille des pierres […]. Tout le fond s’encadrait là, dans les perspectives des deux rives. […] Mais ce qui tenait le centre de l’immense tableau, ce qui montait du fleuve, se haussait, occupait le ciel, c’était la Cité, cette proue de l’antique vaisseau, éternellement dorée par le couchant. […] Plus haut, le soleil opposait les deux faces, éteignant dans
l’ombre les maisons grises du quai de l’Horloge, éclairant d’une flambée les maisons vermeilles du quai des Orfèvres, des files de maisons irrégulières, si nettes, que l’œil en distinguait les moindres détails, les boutiques, les enseignes, jusqu’aux rideaux des fenêtres. (261-2; my emphases)

Claude is mesmerized by what he sees. His enthusiastic exclamation to Christine “Regarde! regarde!” points to the fact that what we are introduced to is his own vision of what he identifies as the birthplace of Paris, “cette âme de Paris éparande autour de son berceau” (262). What he sees is a ready-made painting translated through another instance of ekphrastic mode of writing, which appears in terms of composition, contrasts of colors, and whose motif focuses on the movement and activity of Paris. This “panoramique” presents the Ile de la Cité as though Claude were indeed contemplating a canvas and the vocabulary of painting is for once employed: “au premier plan,” “au milieu,” “en-dessous,” “tout le fond s’encadrait” help situate the composition while the expression “ce qui tenait le centre de l’immense tableau” makes explicit the analogy.

In one more example of Zola’s substituting himself for Claude, the overseeing “on” accompanied by the very general expression “l’œil distinguait” interrupt Claude’s vision and obliterate Claude from the description altogether. Were it not for his saying “Regarde!” to Christine, nothing could tell us in this passage that Claude is the silent observer and that his eye guides us. Rather, Zola prevents his protagonist from expressing and experiencing his vision while he himself weaves in the narration another tableau for the reader. Lony suggests that, in this description, Zola generates through words the painting that Claude has not yet created. I do agree with this interpretation, but I cannot,
however, corroborate Lony’s idea, who follows in the footsteps of Mitterand, that Zola emulates the painter’s brushwork through his prose.90 Indeed, Lony suggests that:

Un fouillis de lignes est aussi rendu par des verbes suggérant le tracé du pinceau [...]. Les adjectifs, eux, rendent compte des volumes [...]. La syntaxe tout entière enfin imite le travail du peintre. [...] La subordination et la coordination évoquent le délié du geste du peintre qui fait glisser la brosse sur la toile; la parataxe rend compte des levers de main, des interruptions de l’artiste ainsi que du regard qui saute d’un point à l’autre. (146)

I believe Lony is overreading the passage. The transparent correspondence he establishes between the gesture of the painter and the syntax of the text seems to me excessive. If anything, I believe the syntax emulates the movement of the eye, of Claude’s eye trying to totalize and internalize this natural tableau. The rapid rhythm, the enumeration, and the concerted effort to look at every element of the scene, from the foreground to the background to the center to the minutest details exemplify Claude’s need to take in what he sees rather than imitating his gesture with the brush.

For the first time in the novel, with the discovery of the Ile de la Cité as his motif, the reader is treated to the full scale of Claude’s creative process. Claude’s epiphany in finding the Ile de la Cité motif and his enthusiasm are likened to the process of giving birth. Claude is imbued with his vision, as though impregnated by it, and he feels invested with the mission to bring it to life: “son visage s’em purprait d’un effort intérieur, on aurait dit le travail sourd d’une germination, un être qui naissait en lui, cette exaltation et cette nausée que les femmes connaissent” (263; my emphasis). If creative

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90 In “Inscriptions,” Mitterand hints at this possibility in his analysis of the Incipit suggesting that: “La rhétorique de la description, avec la période par laquelle celle-ci s’achève, se calque exactement sur les inflexions du coup de pinceau qui a ainsi dessiné, d’un trait continu, sans relever la main, toutes les formes d’un paysage” (157). I believe Mitterand is also overreading the passage.
work resembles pregnancy, the delivery must then come through the pains of labor.\textsuperscript{91}

After a gestation period during which he returns daily to the Pont des Saints-Pères to observe the Ile de la Cité, Claude begins to sketch, demonstrating for Christine what his painting will be like:

Regarde! Je me plante sous le pont, j’ai pour premier plan le port Saint-Nicolas, avec sa grue, ses péniches qu’on décharge, son peuple de débardeurs. Hein? tu comprends, c’est Paris qui travaille, ça! des gaillards solides, étalant le nu de leur poitrine et de leurs bras… Puis, de l’autre côté, j’ai le bain froid, Paris qui s’amuse, et une barque sans doute, là, pour occuper le centre de la composition; mais ça, je ne sais pas bien encore, il faut que je cherche… naturellement, la Seine au milieu, large, immense… (265)

Claude’s enthusiasm and creative frenzy are presented here for the first time without the mediation of the narrator or of another character but rather through his own words. He reveals to Christine his project to encompass the different aspects of Paris the Cité condenses: “Paris qui travaille” vs. “Paris qui s’amuse” with the Seine as the demarcating line. Claude’s “flot de paroles” (264), the unmediated expression of his vision, is only rivaled by his rapid sketching of these images:

Du crayon, à mesure qu’il parlait, il indiquait les contours fortement, reprenant à dix fois les traits hâtifs, crevant le papier, tant il y mettait d’énergie. [Christine], pour lui être agréable, se penchait, affectait de s’intéresser vivement à ses explications. Mais le croquis s’embrouillait d’un tel écheveau de lignes, se chargeait d’une si grande confusion de détails sommaires, qu’elle n’y distinguait rien. (265)

Claude’s ardor and haste lead to such a chaotic entanglement of lines that Christine finds herself unable to decipher any of it. Claude’s unmediated vision is interrupted by Christine’s judgment, which in turn interferes with our reading of the artist’s sketch, imposing the idea of a jumble of lines instead of a sketch. In a similar

\textsuperscript{91} This is very much in keeping with the list of possible titles Zola had in mind for the novel: “Les Faiseurs d’homme,” “Les Créateurs du monde,” “Créer,” “Enfanter.”
fashion, Porbus and Poussin had influenced our reading with the claim that they saw in
La Belle-noiseuse nothing but “des couleurs confusément amassées et contenues par une
multitude de lignes bizarres qui forment une muraille de peinture” (“Chef-d’œuvre” 38).
From this confusion is born “rien,” nothingness, in Christine’s perception, whereas for
Claude, still working on his sketch, this chaos, this disorganized impulse, is
meaningful: 92

Il recommença, il ne se lassait point, reprenait sans cesse le dessin, se
répandait en mille petites notes caractéristiques, que son œil de peintre
avait retenues: à cet endroit, l’enseigne rouge d’une boutique lointaine qui
vibrait; plus près, un coin verdâtre de la Seine, où semblaient nager des
plaques d’huile; et le ton fin d’un arbre, et la gamme des gris pour les
façades, et la qualité lumineuse du ciel. (266)

In this brief passage, we finally gain access to what Claude, as an artist, focuses on: color
mostly, recording the minutest hues and details, and how these colors interact with the
overall composition of the scene.

Claude’s newly unmediated vision develops into a compulsive need to see the
Cité:

A toutes les heures, par tous les temps, la Cité se leva devant lui, entre les
deux trouées du fleuve. Sous une tombée de neige tardive, il la vit fourrée
dermine, au-dessus de l’eau couleur de boue, se détachant sur un ciel
erdoise claire. Il la vit, aux premiers soleils [...]. Il la vit, un jour de fin
de brouillard, se reculer, s’évaporer, légère et tremblante comme un palais
des songes. [...] des orages, dont les éclairs la montraient fauve, d’une
lumière louche de coupe-gorge, à demi détruite par l’écroulement des
grands nuages de cuivre; des vents qui la balayaient d’une tempête,
aiguissant les angles, la découplant séchement, nue et flagellée, dans le bleu
pâli de l’air. D’autres fois encore, [...] elle baignait au fond de cette clarté
diffuse, sans une ombre, également éclairée partout, d’une délicatesse
charmante de bijou taillé en plein or fin. Il voulut la voir sous le soleil
levant [...]. Il voulut la voir à midi, sous le soleil frappant d’aplomb [...].
Il voulut la voir sous le soleil à son déclin [...]. Mais devant ces vingt

92 Again, the echo of “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu” is quite compelling: “Tôt ou tard, il s’apercevra qu’il n’y
a rien sur sa toile” (40; my emphasis).
Cités différentes, quelles que fussent les heures, quel que fût le temps, il en revenait toujours à la Cité qu’il avait vue la première fois, vers quatre heures, un beau soir de septembre, cette Cité sereine sous le vent léger, ce cœur de Paris battant dans la transparence de l’air, comme élargi par le ciel immense, que traversait un vol de petits nuages. (282-3; my emphases)

This almost animistic vision of the Île de la Cité, “cette âme de Paris” (262), transforms the site depending on the various weather conditions, light settings, and times of the day. The anaphora of “il la vit” and “il voulut la voir” punctuates the passage and signals Claude’s obsession with his motif. In this “flot de visions” that relays Claude’s earlier “flot de paroles,” Claude envisions the Cité as a protean entity that takes different shapes and appearances according to the circumstances. The Cité oscillates between roughness, “nue et flagellée,” and softness, “une délicatesse charmante,” that is, a schizophrenic being reminiscent of Christine’s two sides of innocence and lust. Claude’s vision has finally opened up in an unmediated way. His eye relentlessly sees and memorizes, always harking back to the initial vision of the epiphany.

After this long period of incubation, or germination to use Zola’s term, Claude is able to translate his vision into “une ébauche magistrale, une des ces ébauches où le génie flambe, dans le chaos encore mal débrouillé des tons” (285). His unmediated vision becomes a chaotic but masterful sketch, that is, a raw translation of what Claude has stored in his mind. The text does not provide us with an ekphrasis of this ébauche, as though the genius, the unmediated vision Claude is finally able to lay on canvas is ineffable.

As always, Claude is unable to fulfill his expectations, spoiling his work with ever new brushstroke he applies to the sketch, condemned by inability to finish. He abandons his grand project, turning instead to a series of smaller-scale canvases still focused on the
Ile de la Cité but painted from a different vantage point than the Pont des Saints-Pères, so as not to “déflorer la virginité de la grande œuvre, même morte” (286). Again, none of these paintings are described in the text. We only know that the first painting of this series is a “petit tableau, très soigné, plus poussé que de coutume” (286) which he submits to the official Salon. The Jury rejects it, claiming a “peinture de balai ivre” (286). This bizarre critique of Claude’s painting signals a different, confusing, and perhaps confused trait his work displays. The expression “balai ivre” reminds one of Rimbaud’s poem “Le Bateau ivre” (1871) which announces a new way of writing poetry.

After this new failure to be able to exhibit his work at the Salon, Claude starts a sketch whose composition reprises that of the large painting but that includes in the center

une autre barque, très grande, tenant tout le milieu de la composition, et que trois femmes occupaient: une, en costume de bain, ramant; une autre, assise au bord, les jambes dans l’eau, son corsage à demi arraché montrant l’épaule; la troisième, toute droite, toute nue à la proue, d’une nudité si éclatante, qu’elle rayonnait comme un soleil. (287)

This blatant nudity in the midst of an otherwise Realist rendition of Paris throws Sandoz off, but Claude is adamant about the presence of the nude, “une trouvaille” (287) according to him. Claude is now blinded and obsessed by this Femme figure who already shines like the sun and exudes an imposing presence. This “esquisse, faite de verve, sans modèle, admirable encore de couleur” (287; my emphasis) is the real beginning of Claude’s martyrdom. The fact that it is made “sans modèle” means that Claude has internalized his vision of Paris translating it onto canvas, and presenting us with his unmediated version of the Cité which he embodies in the Femme. The Cité has become a desirable and desired woman. For Sandoz, this abnormal behavior is
Sandoz seems to suggest that Claude is in fact a Romantic and Symbolist at heart and that this vision of Paris embodied in a woman is a symptom of this “disease.” The contrast between the male desire for a woman, and the female enfantement illustrates the demiurge state Claude strives to reach in his Pygmalionesque attempt to recreate the flesh and blood woman he desires. From the “âme de Paris,” we here move on to the “chair même de Paris” as though it were a palpable, concrete body. Returning to our discussion of the term “chair” in the context of “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu,” we had concluded that “chair” was raw nakedness and represented a pure, desirable, feminine body, which is the essential substance of the artwork, its “poetry” but also its most elusive aspect.

Claude’s solution to this ineffable is to move away from the realm of reality. His madness and “folie de l’œil” do not lead him to blindness, but rather gradually isolate him from his friends and Christine, leading him to live in a sort of alternate reality: “[Claude] ne parlait plus, […] les regards fixes, très loin, au-delà des murs. Sa face se tendait, une attention convulsée, la portait en avant: il voyait certainement l’invisible, il entendait un appel du silence” (406; my emphasis). Claude has thus reached a level of vision that brings him outside of his anchoring in the modernity of life. The motif of the Cité has literally seized him and even seems to have cast a spell on him: “filant sans rien distinguer des champs ni des arbres, n’ayant au crâne que son idée fixe, dans une hallucination telle, que, par moments, la pointe de la Cité semblait se dresser et l’appeler du milieu des vastes chaumes” (385; my emphases). From that point on, Claude is
described as aloof and as though under a spell, “les yeux larges et perdu, fixés là-bas, au loin dans le vide, sur quelque chose qui semblait l’appeler” (391).

This madness, with its fantastic overtones, culminates in the final vision of the Cité as Claude is drawn once more to the Île in the middle of the night:

Lui, debout, très grand, ne bougeait pas, regardait dans la nuit.
C’était une nuit d’hiver, au ciel brouillé, d’un noir de suie, qu’une bise, soufflant de l’ouest, rendait très froide. Paris allumé s’était endormi, il n’y avait plus là que la vie des becs de gaz, des taches rondes qui scintillaient, se rapetissaient, pour n’être, au loin, qu’une poussière d’étoiles fixes.
D’abord, les quais se déroulaient, avec leur double rang de perles lumineuses, dont la réverbération éclairait d’une lueur les façades des premiers plans, à gauche les maisons du quai du Louvre, à droite les deux ailes de l’Institut, masses confuses de monuments et de bâtisses qui se perdaient ensuite, en un redoublement d’ombre, piqué des étincelles lointaines. Puis, entre ces cordons fuyant à perte de vue, les ponts jetaient des barres de lumières, de plus en plus minces, faîtes chacune d’une traînée de paillettes, par groupes et comme suspendues. Et là, dans la Seine, éclatait la splendeur nocturne de l’eau vivante des villes, chaque bec de gaz reflétait sa flamme, un noyau qui s’allongeait en une queue de comète, les plus proches, se confondant, incendiaient le courant de larges éventails de braise, réguliers et symétriques; les plus reculés, sous les ponts, n’étaient que des petites touches de feu immobiles. Mais les grandes queues embrasées vivaient, remuantes à mesure qu’elles s’étalaient, noir et or, d’un continuel frissonnement d’écailles, où l’on sentait la coulée infinie de l’eau. Toute la Seine en était allumée comme d’une fête intérieure, d’une féerie mystérieuse et profonde, faisant passer des valses derrière les vitres rougeoyantes du fleuve. En haut, au-dessus de cet incendie, au-dessus des quais étoilés, il y avait dans le ciel sans astres une rouge nuée, l’exhalaison chaude et phosphorescente qui, chaque nuit, met au sommeil de la ville une crête de volcan. (408-9)

The lights that keep Paris bright at night contrast sharply with the stark darkness of the moonless sky. Paris appears under the glittering of the gaslights, which act as stars in this “ciel sans astres.” The tableau splits in two following both sides of the river, finally refocusing on the central stream of the river. Despite the nightly panorama, the color that dominates is red rather than black, given the terms “incendiaient, braise, feu, embrasées, rougeoyantes, rouge, volcan.” The gold overtones pierce through sparse
touches of light. The haunting urban vision that springs out of all these descriptions of Paris is that of a “Paris qui brûle,” whether under the blazing sun of the sunsets or the “féerie” of the gas lamps. This beautiful, poetic description fills in for what Claude sees and generates yet another painting Claude should have produced: one where the burning colors of fire and the subtlety of golden tones combine, offering a powerful panorama of the city by night. The passage operates once more under the governance of an impersonal eye, leaving the various elements of the vision come to life by themselves.

In this perfect instance of Berg’s concept of dramatized viewpoint—Claude is watching the Cité while Christine is observing him—the artist’s vision is again superseded by that of the narrator. In fact, Christine finds Claude “à la même place, dans sa raideur entêtée, les yeux sur la pointe de la Cité, qu’il ne voyait pas” (410; my emphasis). In other words, of this enchanting spectacle of the burning river, Claude does not see anything, attentive only to the Cité, that is, what remains invisible. However, for once, this direct vision of the Cité is not what Claude seeks. Rather, looking beyond or through what he cannot see, Claude seems to perceive the invisible, to experience the essence of the Cité, what lies beneath direct vision. Indeed, when he returns home from this eerie night, he resumes work on the Femme figure, which he had been avoiding for a long time:

De sa brosse trempée de couleur, il arrondissait à grands coups des formes grasses, le geste éperdu de caresse; et il avait un rire immobile aux lèvres,
et il ne sentait pas la cire brûlante de la bougie qui lui coulait sur les doigts; tandis que, silencieux, le va-et-vient passionné de son bras remuait seul contre la muraille: une confusion énorme et noire, une étreinte émêlée de membres dans un accouplement brutal. (413)

Claude has managed to fully become the “amant” of his work, consummating his relationship with it in an uncanny and metaphorical brutal mating with the Femme. She is the essence of the Cité he can now possess.

Through Christine’s eyes, we see the results of Claude’s jouissance:

Il peignait le ventre et les cuisses en visionnaire affolé, que le tourment du vrai jetait à l’exaltation de l’irréel; et ces cuisses se doraient en colonnes de tabernacles, ce ventre devenait un astre, éclatant de jaune et de rouge purs, splendide et hors de la vie. Une si étrange nudité d’ostensoir, où des pierreries semblaient luire, pour quelque adoration religieuse, acheva de la fâcher. (413)

In this blasphemous rendition of Paris, Claude’s fantasy and desires finally find an outlet in the representation of the Femme as a golden calf. Perhaps Claude has found the “vrai,” mistaken by the narrator as an “exaltation de l’irréel” because it does not fit the neo-Naturalistic discourses Claude used to hold. When Christine awakens Claude from his “rêve exaspéré de créateur” (415), Claude snaps out of his hallucination, casting a lucid look at his creation:

Qui venait donc de peindre cette idole d’une religion inconnue? Qui l’avait faite de métaux, de marbres et de gemmes, épanouissant la rose mystique de son sexe, entre les colonnes précieuses des cuisses, sous la voûte sacrée du ventre? Était-ce lui qui, sans le savoir, était l’ouvrier de ce symbole du désir insatiable, de cette image extra-humaine de la chair, devenue de l’or et du diamant entre ses doigts, dans son vain effort d’en faire de la vie? Et, béant, il avait peur de son œuvre, tremblant de ce brusque saut dans l’au-delà, comprenant bien que la réalité elle-même ne lui était plus possible, au bout de sa longue lutte pour la vaincre et la repêtrir plus réelle, de ses mains d’homme. (418)

Pushing to the extreme his experiment with the nude in *Plein Air*, which had impressed him as being superior to his talent, Claude dismisses here his achievement of
having stepped out of ordinary reality and entered a different realm, the realm of “l’au-delà.” Looking precisely at his own evaluation of his work, Claude has become an alchemist, turning “la chair,” the raw essence of the Femme, into gold and diamonds, but dismissing this feat as yet another failure to create life. This last painting, like Frenhofer’s *Belle-Noiseuse* and Coriolis’s own experiments with color, is not the failure Christine, Sandoz, and the narrator hail it to be. Rather, it is a step toward an unmediated translation of one’s own desires onto canvas, and as such, it is the realization that this endeavor is not possible in a mimetic, realist format. Moreover, this adorned sex is the raw female sexuality Frenhofer had decided to cover but that Claude leaves unscathed and for everyone to see, a “chair à vif” like Chardin’s *Raie* (Valazza 147). Whereas the Balzacian master had never consummated his “marriage” with Catherine Lescaut after ten years together, Claude, on the other hand, is able to fulfill his desire and to produce on canvas the essence of his “chairs adorées.”

This final painting, which succeeds as a Symbolist painting—the adorned woman is reminiscent of Moreau’s Salome—becomes a symptom of the narration’s own madness, that is, the inner conflict at play between the Naturalist principle of the text that Zola imposes on Claude at the beginning of the novel, and the Symbolism he adopts at the end. Although the narration continuously strives to control the Impressionist and later Symbolist impulses, by obliterating Claude’s artistic vision and using ekphrasis as a political tool to prove their failure, these impulses resist, imposing their presence and their poetics in the text. Just as the vision of Paris with which Claude is obsessed seems to be Zola’s own obsession as well (with its recurrence from *La Joie de vivre*, his novel of Paris as a Greek chorus), Impressionism and Symbolism are perhaps what haunts Zola
and certainly the narrative fabric of *L’Œuvre*. The study of the politics and poetics of ekphrasis in this text allows us to show how Zola undermines his own Naturalist principle by imposing the neo-Impressionist and neo-Symbolist aesthetics in the text.
Conclusion: The Politics and Poetics of Ekphrasis

In *What do Pictures want?*, W. J. T. Mitchell reminds us of the correlation between desire and images tracing it back to the founding myths of art—God making man in his own image; Narcissus falling in love with his reflection; and Pygmalion with his own creation—which revolve around the very link between creation, image, and desire (37). Mitchell also recalls the classical myth according to which drawing originated in love: the Maid of Corinth, whose lover was to leave, “drew in outline on the wall the shadow of his face thrown by the lamp” (Pliny the Elder qtd in Mitchell 66). Mitchell concludes: “So the image is born of desire, is (we might say) a symptom of desire, a phantasmatic, spectral trace of the desire to hold on to the loved one, to keep some trace of his life during his absence” (*What do Pictures want?* 66). Mitchell pertinently titles one of his chapters “Drawing Desire” and he takes the verb “to draw” in its two main meanings: as the act of tracing and the act of pulling. He concludes that:

“Drawing Desire,” then, is meant not just to suggest the depiction of a scene or figure that stands for desire, but also to indicate the way that drawing itself, the dragging or pulling of the drawing instrument, is the performance of desire. Drawing draws us on. Desire just is, quite literally, drawing, or a drawing—a pulling or attractive force, and the trace of this force in a picture. (*What* 59; author’s emphases)

In the case of Frenhofer, Coriolis, and Claude, we have seen that this is certainly the case. Painting is desiring and this is made very explicit in the various depictions of the creative act as a sexual encounter between the painter and his canvas: Frenhofer’s convulsions and the *jouissance* of *La Belle- Noiseuse*; Coriolis’s “travail sabré” (443) in his violent portrayal of an old man with a young prostitute; Claude’s “accouplement
brutal” (413) with the canvas and the idea of the Femme as “le symbole du désir insatiable” (418). In these three texts, ekphrasis, by encompassing the creative process (as in the shield-making episode in Homer’s *Iliad*) and the description of the painter’s artwork, becomes the locus of the artist’s performance of desire. It also becomes the locus of the reader’s desire, the desire to know and to see as one is drawn into the artist’s creative process and artwork.

However, our experience of the paintings is conditioned by what the readings in the texts tell us—even when the paintings are loosely based on existing artworks. Where the viewer in the text does not see anything, or interprets it as a confusion of colors—as in James’s “Madonna of the Future,” or in Frenhofer’s chaos of colors and Coriolis’s “folie de l’œil”—the reader’s experience of the painting is frustrated by what the text does not say/cannot say about the painting. As we saw in Chapter One, paintings already subject their viewer to a “donner à ne pas voir,” a certain dose of invisibility, which, in the texts, translates into the critics’ (Poussin and Porbus, Anatole, Christine and Sandoz, and the narrators) inability to decipher both the surface features and the intrinsic silence of the artwork. The ekphrases are thus usually rendered through a rhetoric of emptiness or madness. What I have tried to show in this dissertation is the potential of this emptiness and madness, the resistance that it poses to the narration, at the thematic and aesthetic level. Benjamin’s “unfathomable, mysterious, and ‘poetic’” emerges in what this rhetoric conceals and strives to stifle.

Indeed, the genius of Frenhofer does not lie in what the painting shows and what the text focuses on at the end—i.e., the fetishistic image of the foot. On the contrary, Frenhofer’s genius is visible in what is concealed in the painting: the buried Catherine
and her transposition on the surface of the canvas through the “couleurs confusément amassées et contenues par une multitude de lignes bizarres qui forment une muraille de peinture” (49). In *Manette Salomon*, Coriolis’s genius appears in the simple comparison with Turner’s paintings through which one understands that this silent ekphrasis (the comparison with the pictorial model is the only description of the painting) is the Goncourts’ only way of addressing Coriolis’s move toward nonfigurative art. Finally, Claude’s genius in *L’Œuvre* emerges in the various ekphrases of his paintings and their comparison with Zola’s own tableaux throughout the text. The aesthetic convergence of the two shows that even though ekphrasis is a political tool meant to prove Claude’s failure, his talent emerges from the way the descriptions appeal to the reader. The confluence of the ekphrases and the ekphrastic mode of writing Zola adopts for his tableaux are also indicative of the fact that Claude’s obsession with a Paris of gold can be seen as a symptom of Zola’s own obsession. Moreover, Claude’s final painting, where he embodies Paris into a bejeweled female nude gives too much to see for both the viewers (Christine, Sandoz, and Claude himself) and the readers when one remains within the demands of a Naturalist aesthetic. If, however, one adopts the Symbolist principle of the painting as its viewing code, one can then open up the potential of the painting. Claude’s Symbolism can then be read as the repressed element of Naturalism.

The politics and poetics of ekphrasis at play in these texts exemplify the aesthetic conflicts that give birth to Impressionism, Symbolism, and abstract art in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ekphrasis is the place where these unwanted, repressed, and misunderstood aesthetics, that is, what is not and what cannot be controlled by the text, emerge. While ekphrasis is shaped by the experience of the
artwork by the viewer, the essence of the artwork resides in the “poetic” aspect of the painting that emerges in the biased language of ekphrasis. One understands that “the mere dead blank” of Theobald’s canvas in James’s “The Madonna of the Future,” that the Belle-noiseuse’s chaos of colors in Balzac’s “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu,’ Coriolis’s “folie d’un talent” in the Goncourts’ Manette Salomon, and Claude’s Naturalist failure in Zola’s L’Œuvre are more than that. It is only by confronting ekphrasis with its language and reading in between its lines that one gets a glimpse of the essence of these artworks. Ekphrasis resists the language imposed upon it, its explicit, surface account of a painting, and allows the painting’s “donner à ne pas voir” to be partly unveiled.

I would like to close with the final lines of Virginia Woolf’s modernist novel To the Lighthouse (1927). I am well aware that this British text is quite different from the novels of my corpus, but it embraces and celebrates the aesthetic with which my texts struggle and provides us, for once, with the picture of a content and lucid artist and the positive experience of an abstract painting. Apelles’s line may have finally reached its “fortune picturale” (Lecercle 131).

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line here, in the centre. It was done, it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (Woolf 192)
Appendix: Paintings

Figure 1. Fantin-Latour, Henri. Hommage à Delacroix. 1864. Oil on canvas. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.
Figure 2. Fantin-Latour, Henri. *Un Atelier aux Batignolles*. 1870.
Oil on canvas. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.
Figure 3. Ingres, Jean-Auguste Dominique. *Raphaël et la Fornarina*. 1814. Oil on canvas. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University.
Figure 5. Delacroix, Eugène. *La Mort de Sardanapole*. 1828. Oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris.
Figure 7. Raphael. *Madonna of the Chair*. 1512-1514. Oil on panel. Palazzo Pitti, Florence.
Figure 8. René Magritte. *Tentative de l’impossible*. 1928. Oil on canvas.
Figure 13. Pollock, Jackson. *Number 12*. 1949. Oil on paper laid on masonite.
Figure 14. Titian. *Venus of Urbino*. 1538. Oil on canvas. Uffizi, Florence.
Figure 17. Chardin, Jean-Siméon. *La Raie*. 1728. Oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris.
Figure 23. Courbet, Gustave. *Un Enterrement à Ornans*. 1850. Oil on canvas. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.
Figure 24. Turner, William. *Shade and Darkness—The Evening before the Deluge*. 1843. Oil on canvas.
Figure 25. Turner, William. *Light and Color (Goethe's Theory)—The Morning after the Deluge, Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*. 1843. Oil on canvas.
Figure 28. Cézanne, Paul. *Route tournante en sous-bois*. 1902-06. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.
Figure 30. Morisot, Berthe. *Femme et enfant au balcon*. 1872. Watercolor, with touches of gouache, over graphite, on off-white wove paper. The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. Charles Netcher in memory of Charles Netcher II, Chicago.


Garb, Tamar. Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-siècle France. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998.


