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REENVISIONING ARTISTIC CREATIVITY: MODERN / POSTMODERN IMPLICATIONS OF BALZAC'S "THE UNKNOWN MASTERPIECE"

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ABSTRACT. This study explores Honoré de Balzac's iconic representation of artistic creativity in *The Unknown Masterpiece* by focusing on an unexamined aspect of his text, namely the seminal role played by critical reception and consumption in artistic production. This influential tale is examined in terms of its artistic and philosophical contributions to reenvisioning creativity by modern and postmodern critics and thinkers. Challenging the ideology of the artist as creative genius, this analysis targets the processes, labor and materials of artistic production and its relations to critical consumption. At issue is the expressive potential of the art work in its creative capacities to bring about the new, to happen and make things happen.

Keywords: *artistic creativity, Balzac, critical reception, critical consumption, masterpiece*

Ranging from the divine inspiration of the muses in antiquity to the enigmatic eruptions of genius in the 18th and 19th centuries, and to the cryptic, rebus-like manifestations of the Freudian unconscious in the 20th century, artistic creativity has continued to resist any simple definition or categorization.[1] For the psychoanalyst Carl J. Jung, the creative process remains downright elusive defying any effort towards rational explanation:

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[1] For an overview of creativity from its mythic origins to its philosophical and theoretical incarnations, see Rob Pope, *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice*, 3-33, 37-89.

> The creative aspect of life which finds its clearest expression in art baffles all attempts at rational formulation. Any reaction to stimulus may be causally explained; but the creative act, which is the absolute antithesis of mere reaction, will forever elude human understanding. It can only be described in its manifestations; it can be obscurely sensed, but never wholly grasped.[2]

Jung's comment echoes the legacy of the romantic aesthetic tradition, for which the creative act remains a fundamental mystery that resists rational explanation. What then explains the enigma of the creative act? This resistance to definition may be symptomatic of the fact that artistic creativity has been traditionally considered in terms of subjective agency alone with disregard of the processes and labor of production, as well as, of the material and social conditions that define the nature and outcome of the work. Historically, the focus has been on the artist as creator rather than the processes and materials of making. But this obsession, indeed fetish with the artist/creator fosters a tautological understanding of creativity, insofar as artistic creation is defined merely as the release of something already there, an innate talent or genius whose mysterious eruption or epiphany recalls the manifestations of religious experience.[3] As Pierre Macherey has noted, "All speculation over man the creator is intended to eliminate a real knowledge: the 'creative process' is, precisely, not a process, a labor; it is a religious formula to be found on funeral monuments," one that obscures both the materials and processes of artistic production.[4]

Honoré de Balzac's (1799-1850) representation of artistic creativity in *The Unknown Masterpiece* (published in 1831, revised and expanded in 1837) has exercised an inordinate fascination for painters, writers and philosophers alike.[5] Depicting the travails of artistic creation, this iconic tale has emerged as one of Balzac's "most intense efforts to analyze the condition of being an artist," as Dore Ashton trenchantly noted.[6] For Arthur C. Danto, "Frenhofer himself is so close to the limits of true artistic creativity as to have become part of the self-image of every

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[2] Carl J. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, 177. https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.218430/2015.218430.Modern-Man_djvu.txt

[3] Jacques Derrida described this idea of genius as the "dubious collusion of some sort of a biological naturalism and a theology based on ecstatic inspiration, see *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres and Genius*, 3.

[4] Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, 77.

[5] Honoré de Balzac's *Gillette, or, The Unknown Masterpiece*, was first published in the newspaper *L'Artiste* with the title "Maître Frenhofer" (Aug. 1831), and re-appeared later in the same year under the title "Catherine Lescault, conte fantastique." This influential story has its own Wikipedia page with an impressive bibliography in the French version, see https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Chef-d%27%C5%93uvre_inconnu.

[6] Dore Ashton, *A Fable of Modern Art*, 10.

artist familiar with him."[7] Paul Cezanne (1899-1906) proclaimed his identification with the tale's painter protagonist, Pablo Picasso illustrated the story in 1931, and film adaptations ensued in 1949 and 1991.[8] But the impact of Balzac's account of the creative process extends far beyond the realm of painting, since Karl Marx (1818-1883) referred to Balzac's tale to describe his own feelings as he prepared to unveil *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1867), his unfinished philosophical "masterpiece."[9] Starting with an analysis of the importance of criticism in the work of artistic creation as bolstered by T.S. Eliot's modernist account, this paper examines the role of critical reception and consumption for the production of art. Challenging the humanist ideology of the artist as creator, it attempts to demystify the creative process by showing how artworks derive their power not from personality or intention, but from the artist's critical labor within the playing field of cultural traditions.

Closer scrutiny of *The Unknown Masterpiece* reveals that Balzac's depiction of the tale's protagonist's artistic genius bring to the fore the importance of consumption for artistic production, namely, the fact that the position of the artist as producer cannot be singled out and dissociated from that of the spectator/ critic. Indeed, the creative processes requisite for the development and construction of an art work also entail evaluation and assessment, that is an experience of the work from a position consumption and spectatorship. Certain key questions will be at issue: Is the act of creation an act that combines artistic production and consumption? Can the position of the artist as producer be separated from that of consumer by dismissing spectatorship as a passive activity? In what sense is the critical consumption of art necessary for its production? Underlying my analysis is Marx's fundamental contention that consumption produces production insofar as it complements and completes it and Barthes's suggestion that the "death" of the author may entail the complementary rise of the reader or spectator, bringing to the fore the importance of consumption as a constitutive element of the creative act.[10] Throughout the text the question of expression proves to be essential, by moving beyond the subjective

[7] Arthur C. Danto, "Introduction," *The Unknown Masterpiece*, 2.

[8] For an analysis of Frenhofer's influence on Cézanne, see Ashton on "Cézanne in the Shadow of Frenhofer" in *A Fable of Modern Art*, 30-48. The films include Sidney Peterson, *Mr. Frenhofer and the Minotaur* (1949), and more recently, Jacques Rivette, *La Belle Noiseuse* (1991).

[9] Paul Lafargue reported that Balzac's tale made a great impression on Marx, see Francis Wheen, *Marx's Das Kapital: A Biography*, 2-3. Marx also advised Frederich Engels to read Balzac's tale, see note (Marx to Engels, Feb.25, 1867), as mentioned by Thomas M. Kemple, *Reading Marx Writing: Melodrama, the Market, and the "Grundrisse,"* 247.

[10] Karl Marx, "Consumption produces production … because a product becomes a real product only by being consumed," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Literature and Art* (New York: International General, 1973), 91.

dispositions of the artist to a consideration of the expressive capacities of the art work in terms of its abilities to invite and enable the spectator's adoption of new meanings and manners of being in the world.

Set in Paris in 1612, Balzac's story presents a fictional painter named Frenhofer, who, consumed by the idea of capturing life travails obsessively on his masterpiece for over a decade. His artist friends, Porbus and Poussin – whose names refer to actual historical figures, Frans Pourbus the Younger (1569–1622) and Nicholas Poussin (1594–1665) – conspire to get him to show them his secret painting by offering Poussin's girlfriend as a model for the painting's completion.[11] But catastrophe ensues, since the painting's display reveals a work so massively over painted as to become unrecognizable both to the viewers and the artist himself. It leads to Frenhofer's lapse into madness and culminates in the destruction of his paintings and his death. How are we to understand Balzac's story? What exactly has gone wrong in this tragic depiction of artistic creativity?

A closer examination of *The Unknown Masterpiece* reveals throughout the tale the importance of critical consumption as constitutive element of the creative act. Notably, while unable to critically view and judge his own work, Frenhofer turns out to be an inspired consumer and critic of works by his artistic peers.[12] Indeed, the reader's first encounter with Frenhofer is not as a maker, but as a critic of his friend Porbus' pictorial rendering of the Saint Mary of Egypt, revealing his extensive understanding of pictorial representation and the creative processes involved:

> Look at your saint, Porbus. At first glance she seems wonderful. But a second look reveals that she is stuck to the background of the painting and that one couldn't walk around her. She is a silhouette with one side to her only, a figure cut out, an image which cannot turn around, cannot change position. I am not conscious of any air between that arm and the ground of the picture; space and depth are lacking; yet perspective is correctly done and the gradation of light and shade exactly observed: but despite these praiseworthy efforts I find it impossible to believe that the warm breath of life animates this beautiful body. It seems to me that if I were to place my hand on the firmly rounded throat, I would find it as cold as marble! No my friend, blood does not flow beneath this ivory skin... (11-12).

[11] For an *analysis* of the fictional names in the story, see Louis Marin, "Des noms et des corps dans la peinture: marginalia au *Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*," in *Autour du* Chef-d'œuvre inconnu *de Balzac,* 46-58.

[12] Gretchen R. Besser's contention is in question, namely that in Balzac's works "criticism destroys creativity" by arguing for the import of critical consumption in the production of art, see *Balzac's Concept of Genius: The Theme of Superiority in the "Comédie Humaine,"* 203.

Frenhofer's critique reveals that the lack of animation or life in Porbus' representation is the result of the painting's inability, and indeed failure to communicate a sense of experience. Although well copied after nature by being drawn correctly, this image lacks spirit or soul, since for Frenhofer the true mark of the mission of art is "not to copy nature but to express it" (13). He argues that it is not enough to catch the appearance of life, but not express its fullness by capturing the enigmatic quality of its overflow. To take the flowering of life by surprise, as Titian and Raphael did, requires a poetic understanding of painting, one where artists instead of merely presuming to copy what they see, surprise by teaching us what it means to see. It calls for approaching painting as a "poet" rather than as a "paltry copist" (11), since it implies the ability to move beyond the mere mastery of formal rules towards a more spontaneous and imaginative experience of painting.

For Frenhofer, the expression of nature requires moving away from the conventions of form: "Strictly speaking, drawing does not exist!" since "the human body is not bound by lines" (19). While recognizing line as a "method by which man realizes the effect of light on objects, he remarks that "there are no lines in nature" (19). Concluding that "the distribution of light alone supplies the visual appearance of the body" (19), he highlights the provisional nature of lines as effects implied in modeling used to detach things from their setting. Frenhofer's analysis suggests that the effect of life or animation emerges from gestures, from the suggestion of movement implied in the interactions of the body with the space it inhabits rather than its depiction as static form. Frenhofer also insists that the body's expressive gestures should be depicted as the continuation, indeed prolongation of a mental impetus: "a hand does not belong only to the body; it expresses and continues a thought which must be seized and rendered" (13).[13] By emphasizing embodiment as a seminal feature of pictorial gestures, he alludes to pictorial expression as a mode of incarnation. Frenhofer concludes his assessment of the saint's beautiful but "lifeless," body, by declaring it a failure in terms of color. The saint lacks what Georges Didi-Huberman has called "the gift of flesh," a deficiency resolved by Frenhofer's infusion of blood-like colors into Porbus' painting.[14] But this lack of flesh tones or carnation is a symptom of a more fundamental problem, that of having failed to consider the potential of painting as a medium of incarnation.

It would be a mistake, however, to simply reduce Frenhofer's insightful critical analysis of Porbus' painting to his personal experiences as a painter. When asked about the reason that would explain the defects of Porbus' painting, Frenhofer

[13] Commenting on Frenhofer's statement, Merleau-Ponty observed that the "artist is the one who arrests the spectacle in which most men take part without really seeing it," see "Cezanne's Doubt," in *Signs*, 18.

[14] Georges Didi-Huberman, *La peinture incarnée: Suivi de Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, 20.

has no problem in diagnosing the creative processes at work: "in two minds you have fluctuated between the two systems, between drawing and color, between the stolid thoroughness, the stiff precision of the old German masters, and the radiant fervor, the joyous abundance of the Italian painters" (12). It is important to note that the terms of Frenhofer's analysis do not merely reflect his personal intuition, or experience, since they refer to pictorial principles widely debated in the seventeenth century based on drawing (or design) and on color.[15] While drawing was associated with the ideas and formal considerations, color was accorded a secondary role, given its perceptual and ostensible decorative appeal.[16] Frenhofer argues that Porbus should have found a way to reconcile the demands of these competing systems of pictorial representation, by melding and combining them into a new artistic idiom, a new pictorial manner. But he concludes that the results bear out Porbus' "wretched indecision," attesting to his inability "to fuse the two rival manners in the fire of your own genius" (12).

Frenhofer's assessment of Porbus' predicament in trying to forge a new position based on prior artistic styles takes on new meaning when considered in terms of T.S. Eliot's analysis of the creative process in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). A renowned poet, literary critic and dramatist, Eliot's prose writings attest to his life-long interest in Balzac, including references to "The Unknown Masterpiece."[17] In his essay, Eliot contends that the emergence of a new work is shaped by tradition and develops as a function of prior artistic works and determinations. Arguing that "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone," he suggests that artistic creation necessitates an understanding of tradition that cannot be inherited since it must be obtained through "great labor."[18] The development of this "historical sense" cannot be honed by mere knowledge or acceptance of the past, since it also requires understanding its functioning in the formation of the present. Making a writer or artist, "most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity," this historical sense "involves perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but

[15] Dating back to the Italian Renaissance to Florence and Venice, drawing (design) and color represent opposing approaches to painting that emphasize form and ideas as opposed to the material and sensual uses of color, see https://www.oxfordartonline.com/page/renaissance-paragone-disegno-and-colore.

[16] Poussin came to be identified as a *painter philosopher* based on his valorization of ideas and artistic judgement understood as critical and creative consciousness, see Dan E. Raţiu, *Peinture et théorie de l'art au XVIIe siècle: Nicolas Poussin et la doctrine classique*, 302-315.

[17] I am indebted to my colleague Ronald Schuchard, general editor of T.S. Eliot's prose writings, who noted that having started to read Balzac in secondary school (1904-05), Eliot first referred to him in a college essay (1909) and continued to do so throughout his lifetime in his various prose writings (1919-1965) collected in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition,* vols. 1-8.

[18] T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays: 1917-1932,* 3.

of its presence.[19] This involves not just a recognition of the legacy of the past but also of its force in compelling the shaping of the present. In the 1980's, the cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu reprised this argument from a post-structuralist perspective, by arguing for the position of the artist as both producer and consumer, where "history is immanent to the functioning of the field."[20]

However, Frenhofer's disquisitions on painting are not simply a matter of theory, since he is able to translate his critical insights into pictorial practice. His retouching and completion of Porbus' painting emphasizes the importance of the position of the viewer in the act of consumption. Commenting that what the painting lacks is a mere nothing, 'but that nothing is everything', Frenhofer calls for a palette and brushes (20). Picking up Porbus' palette, Frenhofer is quick to denounce the quality and tonal range of his pigments: "these colors are fit to be chucked out of the window together with their perpetrator: they're crude and false, disgusting! How could anyone paint with them?" (15). His comment is not reducible to a pictorial conceit or a mere instance of professional rivalry. Frenhofer's resistance to use his friend's colors draws attention to the material dimension of the pictorial act, since pigments owe their hues and expressive possibilities to their development in particular pictorial traditions. As Macherey has argued, their deployment by the artist and modes of function in a specific work are marked by the history of their prior usage and determinations.[21] It is the painter's burden to retool these materials, challenging pictorial idioms through the development of a new manner or style of expression.

Despite his initial reservations, Frenhofer avails himself of Porbus' colors and proceeds to retouch his painting: "you see how with three or four brushstrokes and a bluish glaze the air could be said to circulate around the heard of this poor saint who must have felt stifled and trapped in the closed atmosphere. See how the drapery is now fluttering and how one senses the breeze lifting it!" (16). What the artist restitutes to Porbus' work is its capacity to interact with the viewer. He produces sensation by placing the spectator into the picture so it unfolds and generates a sense of experience. By enabling the drapery to flutter (that is suggest what it does as moving fabric rather than what it looks like as an object), he succeeds in

[19] Eliot noted that, while the creation of a new work is informed by the past, its advent will affect the works that preceded it redefining and repositioning their relations and values: "what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all works of art which preceded it," see "Tradition and Individual Talent," 38.

[20] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature,* 60.

[21] Macheray, *A Theory of Literary Production*, 47.

providing the viewer with a sensation of air as a force that drives this movement. For it is not enough to see the drapery flutter, one must sense the breeze that lifts and sustains its movement as if one were present to it as an experience. Frenhofer's success in "retouching" Porbus' painting reflects his ability not only to assume the position of the viewer, but to put that position to use so that the painting's consumption may take on the modality of an event.

Having responded to Porbus's shortcomings on the level of design, Frenhofer proceeds to address color issues by attempting to warm up the painting with the hint or blush of life: "'Come, my little touches, warm these icy tones! Come on, boom, boom, boom, boom', and he heated up those parts he had earlier signaled as lacking in life by applying layers of color which abolished the disparities due to the artist's temperament…" (16). He adds critical touches that restitute to the painting the warm tones required to give life to the design. The rapid movement of Frenhofer's hands as he applies daubs of paint to animate the otherwise inert image reflects not merely manual dexterity, but also the expression and continuation of a thought obtained through the work's critical assessment. While Porbus supplied through drawing the skeleton, it is Frenhofer who applies through coloring the "effect of life" (13). Challenging the passivity conventionally associated with the consumption of art, Frenhofer's critical appropriation of Porbus' painting leads to its artistic re-creation. But as Hubert Damisch cautioned, the "final touches take their meaning only in relation to the entire work that preceded them."[22] Frenhofer's "completion" of the painting through retouching recasts artistic production as a process of recreation that relies on and is amplified through consumption.

While playfully entertaining the possibility of signing the painting, Frenhofer rises "to pick up a mirror in which he looked at the saint." (17). Why does the painter's completion of Porbus' work rely on the evidence of the mirror to legitimate potential claims to authorship? Frenhofer's reliance on the mirror reprises an old pictorial trope dating back to Leon Battista Alberti and Leonardo Da Vinci.[23] Leonardo advocated the use of flat mirrors because they afforded painters a fresh perspective on their work since the reversibility and inversion of the mirror image "will appear to you like some other painter's work."[24] The estranging effects of the mirror's inversion within the framework of reversibility inscribe the point of view of the artist as consumer, enabling a way of seeing one's work as if the handywork of another. The mirror prosthetically enhances the position of the artist by suggesting

[22] Damisch, "The Underneaths of Painting," 198.
[23] Damisch, "The Underneaths of Painting," 198.
[24] Leonardo Da Vinci, *Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci*, Chap. IX , Sec. 530, "Of Judging Your Own Picture."

through its crisscross projections an experience of consumption. Marking the eruption of otherness within the logic of reversibility, the mirror figures the interplay of artistic production and consumption as interwoven components of artistic creativity.

Balzac's depiction of Frenhofer's creative mastery as a painter reveals "the capital importance of criticism in the work of creation itself," that T.S. Eliot explored in "The Function of Criticism" (1923).[25] He redirected attention to the processes of artistic production (the critical labor and materials involved), thus circumventing the traditional focus on the artist's life and intentions: "Probably, indeed, the larger part of the labor of an author in composing his work is critical labor; the labor of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: This frightful toil is as much critical as creative. … There is a tendency … to decry this critical toil of the artist; to propound the thesis that the great artist is an unconscious artist…" (18). He suggests that this critical discrimination may flash even in the "very heat of creation," becoming part of the work's processes of production. Indeed, the lack of apparent critical labor in the composition of art works does not mean that no such labor has been done, but rather, that, "We do not know what previous labors prepared, or what goes on, in the way of criticism, all the time in the mind of the creators."[26]

Having demonstrated his critical powers both as consumer and producer of art, Frenhofer however is unable to transfer his critical insights to his own work, which he continues to blindly "perfect" to the point of destruction.[27] Why is this the case? He refuses to show his painting even to his closest friends, since he compares the work's display and visual consumption to an act of prostitution: "Show you my creature, my bride? Tear aside the veil beneath which I have covered my pride and joy? That would be prostitution, horrible!" (25-6). His refusal to show his work is not simply a matter of personal caprice, since his equation of the display of his painting with prostitution is symptomatic of an awareness of the liability of art to public pressures of consumption and commodification.[28] The buying and selling of female bodies and paintings is explicitly referenced in the tale, since Porbus'

[25] Eliot, "The Function of Criticism," 18.

[26] Eliot, "The Function of Criticism," 19.

[27] Commenting on "The Unknown Masterpiece," Eliot notes that, "As with the painting in Balzac's *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, there may be a point beyond which every alteration the author makes will be for the worse," see "Introduction to *The Art of Poetry*," Vol. 8, 264-65.

[28] Hollis Clayson explains prostitution's appeal to painters of modern life, as "the point of intersection of two widely disseminated ideologies of modernity," one, "lived and seen at its most acute and true in what was temporary, unstable, and fleeting" and the modern social relation understood to be "in the form of the commodity," see, *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era*, 9.

painting shows Saint Mary of Egypt about to pay for her boat journey to Palestine (11), a passage that she will defray at cost of her body. Though originally "destined" for a patron, Marie de Medici, the painting was eventually "sold by her" (11) and appears to be available for sale yet again.[29] Moreover, the rights to view Frenhofer's masterpiece are obtained at the cost of trading the artists'/viewers' look for the display of Poussin's lover Gilette as a model for the painting.[30] Refusing to allow his painting to be seen, by submitting his "idol to the cold eyes and critical stupidities of imbeciles" (26), Frenhofer holds back his creation from the "dishonor" of being reduced to a commodity. Excluding all other viewers as potential erotic rivals whose lubricious gaze would taint the virginal object of his affections, Frenhofer reserves the consumption of his painting to his private delight: "…but force her to endure the gaze of a man, a young man, a painter? No, no! The next day I would kill whoever sullied her with so much as a glance" (26). His distress at the potential taint implied in another painter's gaze undermines his relation to his creation by confusing his professional position as an artist with his gender and desires as a man. Personalizing the painting's female subject, as his "creature," he animates his creation by designating her as his "bride." By removing her from circulation, he saves her for himself preserving her from the taint associated with other painters' gazes and the commodifying outlook of the public. Rejecting the visual exposure and public consumption of his painting, the artist sets himself up as the work's unique creator and spectator. He becomes the sole witnesses of her perfection, assured of her undying fidelity because he thinks of his creation as a living woman, rather than a picture. While alluding to Pygmalion, Frenhofer undermines Ovid's foundational myth of artistic creation with a nineteenth century masculinist twist.[31] He arrogates to himself as man the prerogative of divine creation that used to belong to the goddess Venus by bringing singlehandedly his creation to life.[32] Gendering and eroticizing the painting as the feminine object of his male passions as a painter, he is blinded by the pleasure he takes in his creation and disabled from experiencing its effectiveness as artistic representation.

[29] For Victor I. Stoichita's analysis of the masterpiece as commodity in Balzac's "The Unknown Masterpiece," see "Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu et la présentation du pictural", in *La Présentation: Recherches poïétiques,* 78.

[30] For the painter's relation to his model as object of his creation, see Diana Knight, *Balzac and the Model of Painting: Artist Stories in La Comédie humaine*, 17-21.

[31] On Balzac's appropriation of the Pygmalion myth and its significance in nineteenth century French culture, see Alexandra K. Wettlaufer, *Pen vs. Paintbrush: Girodet, Balzac and the Myth of Pygmalion in Postrevolutionary France,* 101-136.

[32] For the gender implications of Frenhofer's Pygmalion position, see Wettlaufer, *Pen vs. Paintbrush*, 209-248 and Juliana Starr, "Pygmalion Politics in Balzac's *Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu*," 17-19.

Frenhofer's inordinate passion for and enjoyment of his creation, that he addresses interchangeably as "father, lover, God" (26), cannot make up for the suspension of his critical judgement and the denial of the critical input of future spectators. By preventing others from seeing his painting, Frenhofer also undercuts his own abilities to really see and critically asses his creation: "My painting is no painting. It is a sentiment, a passion! Born in my studio, she must remain there virgin, and only emerge fully clothed" (26). Adam Bresnick argues that Frenhofer's presentation of the work of art as a sublime object whose affect overwhelms the creative artist brings about the destruction both of the man and his work.[33] By confusing the artist with the man and the expression of his personality with the work, Frenhofer mistakes the intensity of his personal emotions for the creative process that requires critical viewing and judgment. By positing both the production and consumption of his creation as a conduit for his personal emotions, Frenhofer undercuts the exercise of his own painterly and critical abilities. He fails to recognize that "What the painter tries to put into his paintings is not his immediate self …but his style," that is, a treatment or manner of being rather than the affective content of its presentation.[34]

The tragic fallacy of Frenhofer's emotional identification with his own work is revealed when he finally consents to show his painting to his fellow artists. When asked what they see, Porbus and Poussin reluctantly conclude: "Nothing at all"! based on the "confused masses of colors contained by a multitude of strange lines, forming a high wall of paint" (30). Within this amalgam of colors and shapeless shadows they eventually notice in the corner of the canvas the "tip of a bare foot emerging from the chaos of colors, tones, vague hues, as shapeless fog; but it was a delicious foot, a living foot!" Petrified with admiration before this fragment that had managed to escape the relentless destruction engineered by the superimposition of layers of paint in the compulsive search for perfection, the foot appeared to them "like the torso of some Venus in Parian marble rising from the ruins" (30). They interpret the appearance of the "living foot" against the background of the over-painted image as an attestation to the painter's genius. Its presence as a fragment bears witness to the search for perfection pursued as an end that brought about the ruin of Frenhofer's painting. Taken as a sign that "there is a woman underneath," the foot fragment alludes to the pictorial plenitude implied in the sense of life that Frenhofer strove to achieve in his work, but also to its potential loss, figured through the woman's entombment in a wall of paint. These allusions

[33] Adam Bresnick, "Absolute Fetishism: Genius and Identification in Balzac's *Unknown Masterpiece*," 134-152.

[34] See Merleau-Ponty, "The Indirect Language," in *The Prose of the World*, 56.

to painting as the embodiment of life also suggest the possibility of its death, a demise that would reduce painting to the task of mourning.

Witnessing their astonishment at the sight of his painting Frenhofer first interprets Porbus' and Poussin's responses as a confirmation of its perfection: "You did not anticipate such perfection!" But their shocked exclamations that they see "nothing at all" (29-30), eventually constrain him "to see it himself as the others see it.[35] Giorgio Agamben contends that this double way of seeing from the perspective of the artist and the spectator leads to Frenhofer's doubling and the annulment of the work's unity.[36] Initiated through their gaze and exclamations to the idea that "there is nothing on his canvas," Frenhofer is confronted with the deadly realization that his work has amounted to "Nothing! nothing! (31). Frenhofer's failure to achieve his idea of artistic perfection marks the disparity between artistic intention and expression that has been crucial to the myth of the artist as creative individual. But, as we shall see, even as the artist may be unable to consciously control the expression of his or her intentions, unintentional forms of expression are also produced, but unavailable to be experienced or claimed by the artist or his peers. Is this perceived failure or ruin of painting a sign of its destruction or is it also a portent of its future?

Porbus' and Poussin's initial shock at Frenhofer's painting, seen as "confused masses of colors contained by a multitude of strange lines, forming a high wall of paint," underlines the unprecedented nature of their viewing experience. The indefinable nature of the "so-called painting," eludes recognition since it "offers nothing precise, nothing definite to be seen" as Damisch observed.[37] And yet, in the 1831 version of the tale, the inchoate formlessness of the "wall of paint" is compared to a painter's palette: "All I see are colors amassed as if on a palette."[38] This analogy shows Porbus' and Poussin's inability to make sense of their viewing experience, since it appears to mistake the painting's subject matter for the materials required for its production. But, as Michael Haworth reminds us reprising a Kantian trope, "the only way that originality can emerge is by risking failure and tarrying with senselessness."[39] The pictorial experience that the tale's protagonists and Balzac's nineteenth century contemporaries interpret as senseless sets into

[35] Hubert Damisch, "The Underneaths of Painting," 202.

[36] George Agamben, "Frenhofer and his Double" in *The Man Without Content*, 11. He suggests that the birth of modern aesthetics may emerge from such schisms, that also include genius and taste, and form and matter, 11-12.

[37] Hubert Damisch, "The Underneaths of Painting," 207.

[38] Pierre Laubriet, "Appendice," *Un catéchisme esthétique: Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu de Balzac*, 238.

[39] Michael Haworth reprises a Kantian trope in his article, "Genius Is What Happens: Derrida and Kant on Genius, Rule-Following and the Event," 331.

motion possibilities whose artistic meanings come into play belatedly through the recognition of posterity. Arthur Danto remarked: "Indeed, it is irresistible to see that wall of paint crisscrossed with lines … as the first truly Modernist work![40] The idea that the formless materiality of paint could eventually emerge as the model for a new idea of painting (void of figurative qualities or natural inspiration) would be yet to come.

Modern readers of Balzac's tale came to see Frenhofer's creative struggle and supposed failure as figuring the invention of modern art by staging the birth of pictorial abstraction from the ruins of figuration.[41] But as the reception of Frenhofer's painting demonstrates, the unfolding of the work's meaning in the viewer's consciousness is a happenstance event, whose belated recognition cannot be calculated or predetermined in advance. Consequently, a different understanding of the art work is called for that would claim its capacity for bringing about the eruption of the new. It implies understanding the work of art not just as object, but as an encounter with time, as André Malraux suggested.[42] Building on Malraux and Merleau-Ponty, Jean-François Lyotard has argued for a postmodern understanding of art not as imitation or representation but as "occurrence" or "event" to which the viewer is witness and as such under obligation to respond.[43] He claimed: "Hence the fact that the work or the text have the character of an *event*; hence also, they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their being put into work, their realization always begin too soon."[44] Arriving "too late" for its author and "too soon" for the viewer (unprepared for its emergence), the work's temporal incongruence will fuel its potential for happening. Its conceptual advent postponed, art's capacity to happen and make things happen would emerge as its defining feature. But what are the processes involved and how do the art work's modes of presentation coax and provoke the eruption of the new?

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[40] I kept out the phrase "with the realistic fragment of the woman's foot" from Danto's remark, since it is the wall of paint rather than the foot that resists recognition by the viewers, see his "Introduction," 10.

[41] For an analysis of the ambiguous nature of Frenhofer's artistic failure, see Quilliot, Roland, "L'ambiguïté de l'échec artistique: réflexions sur *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* de Balzac," 20-25.

[42] André Malraux, "The Work of Art: Speech to the International Association of Writers for the Defense of Culture" (1935), in *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary*, 565.

[43] Jean-François Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,' in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, 93. For an analysis of the nature of this ethical obligation, see Derek Attridge, "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other," 27- 30. For an analysis of Balzac's postmodernist narrative, see Andrea Del Lungo, "Balzac postmoderne: L'œuvre-miroir, l'œuvre-réseau, l'hyper-roman," 213-224.

[44] For Lyotard's formulation and critique of the temporal paradoxes of postmodernism, see "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 81.

For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, yet another inspired reader of Balzac's tale, the work is not a mere product of artistic expression like a thing or object, since it must be capable of producing expression by awakening experiences which will "make their ideas take root in the consciousness of others."[45] He claims that the artist's "completion" of the work only comes into effect upon the spectator's appropriation and consumption of art:

> "the work is finished only that moment, precocious or late, when the spectator is reached by the canvas and mysteriously resumes in his own way the meaning of the gesture through which it was made. … without any other guide than a certain movement discovered in the line or an immaterial trace of the brush, the spectator then rejoins the silent world of the painter…"[46]

Born out of artistic expression, the art work generates expression, by inviting the spectator to retrace the movement of gestures and recapture their meaning.[47] It is the "process of expression that brings meaning into existence," since the sense of gestures is not given, but recaptured belatedly by an act on the spectator's part.[48] However, this recovery of meaning is not reducible to a cognitive operation, since it implies an indirect mode of communication and comprehension that comes about through "the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others."[49] This operation implies abiding in the bodies of others, since the pattern of their gestures invite and teach us new ways of being and expressing the world.[50] Re-envisioning creativity through bodily expression, Merleau-Ponty concludes that: "It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings."[51] And

[45] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," *Sense and Non-Sense*, 18-19. He goes on to claim that "it is not enough for a painter like Cezanne, an artist or philosopher to create and express an idea; they must also awaken the experiences which will make their ideas take root in the consciousness of others" 19.

[46] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 55; revised as "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," 51.

[47] I am reprising here in terms of art, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's formulation regarding language and the production of meaning, see "An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of his Work," 8.

[48] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 183.

[49] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 185. Cf. Bourdieu's elaboration of *habitus* understood as the physical embodiment of cultural capital through ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions made available through life experiences, see *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72-87.

[50] Maurice Merleau-Ponty notes that "it is through the action of culture that I come to abide in lives that are not mine," see "The Indirect Language," in *The Prose of the World*, 87. For a variant formulation, see, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," in *Signs* 75.

[51] Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, 162.

reprising his formulation, we may add that it is by lending their body to painting that viewers are invited to learn and adopt new ways of envisioning and understanding the world.

Conclusion

This analysis of *The Unknown Masterpiece* has attempted to challenge the tale's iconic role in reinforcing the romantic conception of the artist as creative origin and genius. The modern and postmodern implications of Balzac's tale enable a re-envisioning of the artist's role, position and contribution to artistic production. It is marked by Bourdieu's critique of the "charismatic ideology of creation," that directed our gaze towards the apparent producer, thus preventing further inquiry into conditions that have created the "creator" and processes of production in excess of the artist's purview.[52] Building on Roland Barthes' claim that "to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author," this study has sought to avoid the error of mistaking the birth of the reader/ viewer for the death of the author/artist.[53] Rather than perpetuate these categories by replacing one myth with another, both were taken to task: first, by showing how artistic production relies on critical consumption to devise a new position within the playing field of the tradition; and second, by exploring the productive role of consumption that gains completion through the expression of meaning. By reconsidering the relations of artistic production to consumption, the conventional roles and functions assigned to the artist, viewer and work of art are refigured to include expression along with the intervention of the other in the eruption of the new. Recalling the chiastic interplay of the mirror as pictorial device, the intertwining of artist and viewer brings about a new idea of the art as an event whose occurrence will continue to unfold. This reenvisioning of artistic creativity as a process whose completion relies upon the intervention of spectators opens art works to future appropriations and enriches artistic production by multiplying the potential makers and meanings attached to art.

[52] Pierre Bourdieu, *Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, 167.

[53] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text,* 148. In his analysis of Balzac, Barthes reaffirmed that "the reader [is] no longer a consumer but a producer of the text," S/Z, 4.

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