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Homo Pictor.

Ekphrasis as frontier of the image in Thomas Bernhard's Frost

by Giuseppe Di Liberti

Strauch the surgeon from the hospital of Schwartzach, a small Austrian town on the border with Switzerland, just a few kilometres from Lake Constance, secretly entrusts a young student – the narrator whose name we will never know – to go to Weng, a village in Upper Austria, to observe the conduct of his brother, Strauch the painter. *Frost*, Thomas Bernhard's first novel, published in 1963, presents the observations made by the young student during his twenty seven day mission in Weng, a place «so ugly that it's characterful; far prettier landscapes have no character»¹.

«Watch the way my brother holds his stick, I want a precise description of it»². These are the only words of Strauch the surgeon reported by the narrator, before setting out on his voyage and before the long ramblings of Strauch the painter prevail over his ability to observe an undefined illness. This phrase works as a clue and is directed at the reader at least as much as it is at the young student of medicine. Indeed, it is not rare for Bernhard to place *clues* of this type in the early pages³.

In this way, we have summarised the basic plot of Bernhard's novel as well as the three elements at the centre of our brief analysis: the painter's stick, the landscape of Weng and the role of the young student as witness.

This analysis has two main aims: (1) to consider a special mode of notional *ekphrasis* which for the sake of brevity we will call here *iconoclastic ekphrasis*; (2) to verify how painting representation methods can be used as a model for the structure of the novel⁴.

Strauch is a painter who abandoned painting some years ago but, despite this renunciation, *cannot but continue to be a painter*. All his actions – the long walks, his use of the stick – may be considered as an extension of his painting activity where the possibility itself of producing images is denied, due to an inauspicious form of Platonism on one hand and due to the *flatness* of the landscape on the other hand. For Strauch, recourse to verbal description is the inevitable and extreme consequence of the painting process and it is in this sense that the ekphrastic process played out in *Frost* is seen to be paradoxical and iconoclastic: he constructs verbal images to state the impossibility and the failure of the pictorial image. We can read in this way not just the moments in which Strauch describes what he sees or imagines, but the entirety of his movements in the landscape of Weng and it is in this sense that his irremediably being a *homo pictor* offers a narrative structure to the entire novel. In the Preface to the Italian edition of *Frost*, Pier Aldo

¹ Thomas Bernhard, *Frost*, Frankfurt a. M., Insel Verlag, 1963; English translation by Michael Hofmann, *Frost*, New York, Vintage International, 2008, digital edition, p. 12.

² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³ Emilio Garroni, in an essay of his dedicated to *Korrektur*, writes: «A clue that the theme [of Altensam, the town where the main characters in the novel were born] is central can be traced right from the first page of the novel, where it appears in the reference of the title to a manuscript left by Roithamer, who committed suicide, which the narrator friend is consulting, alongside other texts and drawings: "With regard to Altensam and everything which is connected to Altensam, with particular reference to the cone"» (Emilio Garroni, *Un esempio di interpretazione testuale: Thomas Bernhard's "Korrektur"* (1996), in Id. *L'arte e l'altro dall'arte. Saggi di estetica e di critica*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2003, pp. 128-163, p. 138.

⁴ On the various different possible forms of homology between text and image, see Michele Cometa, *Letteratura e arti figurative: Un catalogo*, in "Contemporanea", 3 (2005), pp. 15-29, p. 24.

Rovatti writes: «Re-reading *Frost*, I often had the desire to draw, perhaps with a small and schematic drawing, the map of the place, as you do when you enter a new house in order to have an idea of the location and the size of the rooms, the corridors and the balconies. [...] I would like to be able to draw this map, which I can see precisely in my head, but I think, then, that every reader of *Frost* certainly creates his own one, and that each one is probably different from the others»⁵. It is precisely this possibility of mapping the movements of Strauch which articulate the narrative scheme of *Frost*.

We can add a third aim which deserves a full accurate historic-literary study which, then – for reasons of space and non-relevance – we can only refer to here. Not only does *Frost* represent one of the best Austrian examples of anti-*Heimatroman*⁶ but, through the use of these three functional elements – and, of course, not just through these⁷ – Bernhard clearly overturns a *Biedermeier* literature not without formative purposes, with Adalbert Stifter being an exemplary representative. In *Old Masters*, it is no coincidence that Bernhard gives Reger, the main character observed by a narrator, a ferocious invective against Stifter: «If ever there was such a concept as tasteless, dull and sentimental and pointless literature, then it applies exactly to what Stifter has written. Stifter's writing is no art, and what he has to say is dishonest in the most revolting fashion»⁸ and continues in this way for a few pages before moving onto the more well-known yet no less cruel pages against Heidegger («Just as Stifter has totally and in the most shameless manner kitschified great literature, so Heidegger, the Black Forest philosopher Heidegger, has kitschified philosophy...»⁹). Within Reger's bitter words, however, we find a further useful clue for reading *Frost*:

«Stifter's descriptions of nature are always extolled. Never has nature been so misconstrued as in Stifter's descriptions, nor indeed is it as boring as he makes us believe on his patient pages [...]. Stifter makes nature monotonous and his characters insensitive and insipid, he knows nothing and he invents nothing, and he describes, because he is solely a describer and nothing else, he describes with boundless naïveté. He has the quality of poor painters... »¹⁰.

Stifter, indeed, was also a painter of landscapes (*Der Königssee mit dem Watzmann*, oil on canvas, 1837, Vienna Österreichische Galerie), urban views (*Blick in die Beatrixgasse*, oil on cloth, 1839, Vienna Schubert-Geburtshaus) and ruins (*Ruine Wittinghausen*, oil on canvas, 1833-35, Vienna Schubert-Geburtshaus), and for sure Reger's invective against his writing could also be extended to his paintings. As Timothy Malchow has emphasised, *Frost* can be read as an inverted Austrian *Bildungsroman*¹¹ and this inversion, we may add, is systematic and involves all the levels

⁵ Pier Aldo Rovatti, *Contagio*, preface to Thomas Bernhard, *Gelo*, Turin, Einaudi, 2008, p. IX.

⁶ J.J.Long, 'Bernhard, Frost', in *Landmarks in the German Novel 2*, ed. by Peter Hutchinson and Michael Minden, "British and Irish Studies in German Language and Literature", 47, Oxford and Bern, Peter Lang, 2010, pp. 7-24, p. 9: «The status of *Frost* as a landmark novel, then, needs to be understood against a cultural backdrop dominated by a generally provincial orientation and by modes of dissemination that privileged small-scale ephemera. Beyond this, it also needs to be seen as a response to a cultural genre whose roots lie in the late nineteenth century, but which continued to play a major role in the immediate post-war years: the *Heimatroman*. The Austrian *Heimatroman* or rural novel, as exemplified in the work of the nineteenth-century writers Ludwig Anzengruber (1839-89) and Peter Rosegger (1843-1918), celebrated rural and agricultural life, community, rootedness, and tradition, and books by *Heimtdichter* sold by the million in 1950's Austria; [...] If Hans Lebert's 1960 novel *Die Wolfshaut* is generally identified as the first anti-*Heimatroman*, then the second is Bernhard's *Frost*». Also see Joseph A. Federico, *Heimat, death and the other in Thomas Bernhard's "Frost" and "Verstörung"*, in "Modern Austrian Literature", 29 (1996), H. 3-4, pp. 223-242.

⁷ For a thorough comparison – to which we will return – between *Nachsommer*, Stifter's famous *Bildungsroman* and *Frost*, see Timothy B. Malchow, *Thomas Bernhard's "Frost" and Adalbert Stifter: Literature, Legacy, and National Identity in the Early Austrian Second Republic*, in "German Studies Review", Vol. 28, No. 1 (Feb., 2005), pp. 65-84.

⁸ Thomas Bernhard, *Alte Meister. Komödie*, Frankfurt A. M., Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985; English translation by Ewald Osers, *Old Master*, London, Penguin Classics, 2010 (1989¹), digital edition.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Timothy B. Malchow, *Thomas Bernhard's "Frost" and Adalbert Stifter*, cit., p. 66: «*Frost* can be read as an inverted Austrian *Bildungsroman*. Its unnamed, first-person narrator is an impressionable young medical student who is sent to

of construction of the novel. In particular in *Frost*, Bernhard defines a statute of description which will run through all his work and which, perhaps, finds its best exemplification in *Old Masters*.

Every two days for about thirty years, Reger goes to the 'Bordone Room' of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna to look at Tintoretto's *White-bearded man* looking for a *clear error* which makes looking at it bearable («the complete and perfect are basically abhorrent to us»¹²). Michele Cometa shows how the descriptions of paintings in *Old Masters* reveal the relationship between *ekphrasis* and narration: «The paintings in this novel are basically a “non-place”, they exist precisely because words (and music) seems to never reach them; they act, they “look at” their viewers, [...] but they communicate nothing »¹³. If in *Old Masters* paintings are words, in *Frost* it is words which absorb the visual dimension and become paintings¹⁴. Cometa continues: «Bernhard is careful not to describe, but it is precisely for this reason that he reveals “his” paintings in their un-describability, as an unresolved residue within the narration, referring to them and illustrating them»¹⁵. And he concludes: «In the novel we witness the systematic demolition of all the claims of positive integration between the arts and between the arts and life [...] and we know [...] that no ontological claim can be satisfied by painting, either in terms of mimesis, however platonically abhorred, or in terms of re-creation»¹⁶.

And yet, this itinerary for the dissolution of the image already starts in Bernhard's first novel: word and image appear to be irremediably divided and the rambling which follows the loss of the image cannot be but destined for failure. To borrow the words of Gottfried Boehm, Bernhard seems to summarise the lesson of modernity «which consists of the growing distance which separates word and image»¹⁷.

If Regen seems to accurately avoid the masterpieces housed in the Kunsthistorisches Museum to prefer more forgotten works, the only pictorial reference in *Frost* is, indeed, to one of the masterpieces of the Viennese museum, «a river landscape by Breughel the Elder», almost certainly *The hunters in the snow* (oil on wood, 117x162 cm, 1565)¹⁸. This is a work whose reception is not

study his supervisor's deranged brother, the former painter Strauch, in the Alpine village of Weng and to report back secretly on his condition. The narrator's interactions with Strauch so transform him that he finally loses his very sense of identity. Several scholars have previously noted *Frost's* intertextual allusions to the *Bildungsroman* genre and to Stifter's *Der Nachsommer* specifically. Bernhard's appropriation of *Der Nachsommer* enabled him to participate in emerging narratives of Austrian national identity that relied upon Stifter's work as an iconic artefact. In *Frost*, Strauch's unresolved, unspecified traumas and his concomitant tendency to see butchery as an irrepressible feature of the Alpine landscape prevent him from forming a meaningful identity».

¹² Thomas Bernhard, *Old Masters*, cit.

¹³ Michele Cometa, *Parole che dipingono. Letteratura e cultura visuale tra Settecento e Novecento*, Rome, Meltemi, 2004, p. 153. The contribution proposed here owes much to the pages which Cometa dedicates to *Old Masters*, in the last chapter, with the significant title *La visione estinta*, of *Parole che dipingono* (re-proposed, then, in *La scrittura delle immagini. Letteratura e cultura visuale*, Milan, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2012). We refer to this for a rich and accurate analysis of the ekphrastic methods adopted by Bernhard in *Old Masters*.

¹⁴ Rovatti again emphasises: «Strauch sees the words: this claim, which seems to be ridiculous, will become a key motif in Bernhard's subsequent novels, and will be his famous words written in italics, italics as visualisation of things» (Pier Aldo Rovatti, *Contagio*, cit., pp. X-XI).

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 156. On the relationship between painting and narrative structure in *Old Masters*, also see Ingeborg Hoesterey, *Visual Art as Narrative Structure. Thomas Bernhard's Alte Meister*, in “Modern Austrian Literature”, 21 (1988), Nr. 3/4, pp. 117-122.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 166.

¹⁷ Gottfried Boehm, *Bildbeschreibung. Über die Grenzen von Bild und Sprache*, in Id. e H. Pfotenhauer, a cura di, *Beschreibungskunst - Kunstbeschreibung. Die Ekphrasis von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Munich 1995, pp. 23-40; Italian translation by M. G. Di Monte and M. Di Monte, *La descrizione dell'immagine. Sui confini fra immagine e linguaggio*, in Id., *La svolta iconica*, Rome, Meltemi, 2009, pp. 187-212, p. 191.

¹⁸ In reality, Bernhard, as we will see, does not offer a detailed description of the painting and the Kunsthistorisches Museum houses, as well as *The hunters in the snow* and many other works by Bruegel the Elder, another two paintings in the series of five *Months: The gloomy day* or *February* (oil on wood, 118x163 cm, 1565) and *The return of the herd* or *November* (oil on wood, 117x159 cm, 1565), both river landscapes. *The hunters*, as well as being the only snowy landscape of the three, seems to be the one which corresponds best to the human condition described by the narrator.

without interesting contradictions: on one hand, it is an image used (perhaps too much) for serene Christmas cards¹⁹, on the other hand, explored by Tarkovskij's camera in *Solaris* (USSR, 1972, colour, sound, 165min), referred to in the construction of the shots of *The mirror* (USSR, 1975, b/w colour, sound, 108min), again by Tarkovskij, shot by Lars von Trier in the prologue of *Melancholia* (Denmark, Germany, France, Sweden, Italy, 2011, colour, 130min) to the notes of Wagner's overture *Tristan and Isolde*. Or again by William Carlos Williams who, in the last of his collections *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* of 1962, has to dedicate a poem to *The hunters*²⁰.

Forgive the long quotation, but this page of *Frost*, appearing right in the middle of the novel, manages to bring together many of the matters discussed here:

«Watching him now, I thought a little puff of wind would be enough to knock him over. When he stopped, he marked the ground with his stick, Indian signs, he told me, that are incomprehensible to me. Some of these signs remind me of animals, a cow for instance, a pig; others are shaped like temples, or the courses of rivers. Circles. Other geometrical forms. Even up where I was, I could hear him muttering to himself. Like an old general talking to himself, and then turning to the army that will always be there in his imagination. And he looked, too, like someone bending over a staff map, with everything on it down to the least detail depending on hi. He was talking in foreign languages as well. Asian words and scraps were flying through the air. The whole scene, with him the focus of it, reminded me of a painting I saw years ago once in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna; I can even remember the room it's hanging in: a river landscape by Breughel the Elder, where people are trying to find distraction from death, in which they are successful, but only, as the picture seems to be saying, at the price of infinite torments in Hell. The black of the tree stump, which shaded into the black of the painter's jacket, and the black of his pants and his stick, was finally picked up the black of the mountain peaks»²¹.

The nature which Strauch and the student are passing through is deeply historical, but in the sense by which, according to Benjamin, in German tragic drama, when «the hereafter is emptied of everything which contains the slightest breath of this world»²², history dissolves within natural phenomena²³. The traces of war and its horrors seem to be inscribed in the landscape, precisely as ruins which escape the linearity of history but never stop reminding. Not only because the corpses of the soldiers are still to be found beneath the snow and the pine needles but, above all, because «Nothing, not one thing, was mute. Everything continually expressed its pain. “The mountains, you see, are great witnesses to great pain”»²⁴. History is rooted in the landscape and the landscape resists all forms of progress. When, for example, one of the recurrent characters, an engineer who supervises the construction of a power station, focuses our attention on the time of modern civilisation, on the progress of machines and energy and on the idea of the future, he appears to be extraneous—especially to the eyes of the painter—to the crystallised time of the inn in Weng where the painter and the student are staying.

¹⁹ See Martin Kemp, *Looking at the face of the Earth*, in “Nature”, 456, 18 December 2008, p. 876.

²⁰ «The over-all picture is winter/ icy mountains /in the background the return/ from the hunt it is toward evening/ from the left/ sturdy hunters lead in/ their pack the inn-sign/ hanging from a/ broken hinge is a stag a crucifix/ between his antlers the cold/ inn yard is/ deserted but for a huge bonfire/ the flares wind-driven tended by/ women who cluster/ about it to the right beyond/ the hill is a pattern of skaters/ Brueghel the painter/ concerned with it all has chosen/ a winter-struck bush for his/ foreground to/ complete the picture» (William Carlos Williams, *The Hunters in the Snow*, in *Pictures from Brueghel and other poems: collected poems 1950-1962*, New York, New Directions, 1962). On Williams' ekphrasis, see J. Heffernan, *Museum of Words. The Poetry of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, Chicago, Chicago UP, 1993, pp. 165 e ss.

²¹ Thomas Bernhard, *Frost*, cit., p. 130.

²² Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, English translation by John Osborne, London, Verso, 2003, p. 66.

²³ Stephen Dowden cleverly observes: «Bernhardian nature must be understood as a metaphorical transposition of history» (*Understanding Thomas Bernhard*, Columbia, SC, University of South Carolina Press, 1991, Chapter 2 *Frost and Gargoyles*, pp. 11-29, p. 19). To use Benjamin's terms, we could say that nature may be understood as an *allegorical* transposition of history.

²⁴ Thomas Bernhard, *Frost*, cit., p. 149.

In this landscape, Strauch could disappear at any time. He himself is a creature in ruins. His obsession for illness, the constant aspiration for suicide, reveal not so much the desire to get away from life— which he has already renounced by his exile to Weng – but the desire to become a corpse, to reduce his very history to a natural phenomenon of decay. The student *sees*, in this landscape, Strauch's end, which he will learn of, as we read in the final words of the novel, from the pages of a newspaper: «The unemployed man G. Strauch from V. has not been seen in Weng or environs since last Thursday. In view of the heavy snowfalls currently being experienced there, the search for the missing person, in which members of the police also took part, has had to be called off»²⁵. The landscape of *Frost* is extremely topographic²⁶ and, at the same time, borderless, without *orientation*, and thereby denies the very possibility of the visual representation of memory. «Bernhard's narrative seems to call up the founding myth of mnemotechnique, in which death sets off the work of memory. What is to be remembered in and for the present is disfigured»²⁷. Just as if the relationship between signs and meanings was irrevocably broken down.

Strauch uses his stick to draw (indecipherable) signs in the snow. At times, the stick seems to be a *substitute* for a brush, at times a real *prosthesis* in the sense given by Jaspers²⁸. «Without my stick, I most probably wouldn't be alive!»²⁹, Strauch says. The stick is above all the instrument of hypotyposis: it designs signs of maps³⁰, it indicates the path or the direction³¹ or the landscape to be observed. Here we are using the term hypotyposis in its broadest sense, summarised well in 1830 by Fontanier: «L'hypotypose peint les choses d'une manière si vive et si énergique, qu'elle les met en quelque sorte sous les yeux, et fait d'un récit ou d'une description, une image, un tableau, ou même une scène vivante»³². As an instrument of hypotyposis, for Strauch, the stick is an identifying element and, in a certain way, an iconographic element. With his stick, Strauch spatialises the image, renders it factual, makes it a *thing*. But the signs which Strauch reveals with his stick are already inscribed in nature. The extreme attention in tracing the signs in the snow leads him to «Asian words and scraps were flying through the air». But it is not so much a case of an Asian language, but the *language of nature*: «His powers of invention extend as far as “astonishing verbal constructions verging on the profound,” which he finds in the forests and fields, in the meadows and the deep snow»³³.

The scene with Strauch absorbed drawing with his stick reminds the student of Brueghel's *The hunters in the snow*. A Christmas card, as we said. A card if, in a small-sized reproduction, we lose the minute details of Bruegel the cartographer. To the left of the hunters and their dogs, there is an inn with a deer sign. The sign contains the emblem of Saint Eustachius – protector of gamekeepers –, who converted to Christianity after finding a crucifix transfixed in the body of a deer. With respect to Dürer's splendid engraving of Saint Eustachius from 1501, Brueghel would appear to expand the perspective, keeping the iconographic traits. In front of the inn, men at a fire are singeing the pig they have just finished slaughtering, as shown by the wooden vat. In the background, on the icy river, other men seem to be playing on the ice.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 279.

²⁶ In a study focusing on the topographic dimension of *Frost*, Katya Krylova writes: «The Alpine topography in *Frost*, far from constituting a *Heimat*, is one characterized above all by a sense of *Unheimlichkeit*» (*Eine den Menschen zerzausende Landschaft': Psychotopography and the Alpine Landscape in Thomas Bernhard's "Frost"*, in "Austrian Studies", Vol. 18, *Austria and the Alps* (2010), pp. 74-88, p. 76).

²⁷ Bianca Theisen, *The Art of Erasing Art. Thomas Bernhard*, in "MLN", Vol. 121, No. 3, German Issue (Apr., 2006), pp. 551-562, p. 559.

²⁸ Cfr. Karl Jaspers, *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* Berlin, Göttingen, Heidelberg, Springer-Verlag, 1959.

²⁹ Thomas Bernhard, *Frost*, cit., p. 275.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 99.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 15-16: «If you walk the way I'm pointing with my stick, you'll come to a valley where you can walk back and forth for hours, without the least anxiety," he said. "You don't have to be afraid of being found out. Nothing can happen to you: everything has died. [...] It's like walking centuries before human settlement».

³² Pierre Fontanier, *Les figures du discours* (1830), Paris, Flammarion, 1968, p. 390.

³³ Ibid., p. 64.

Bernhard's *ekphrasis* seems to be suspended between the mimetic dimension and the notional dimension³⁴: the direct evocation of the painting overlaps immediately with an interpretation of the human condition represented and then passes fluidly, through the «black of the tree stump» to the portrait of the painter observed by the student. Here in this section, again, Bernhard *dismantles* the painting to reveal the limits – and the impossibility – of pictorial representation. Citing the work of Brueghel, Bernhard gives us a false centre using two strategies. Indeed, he does not report the title of the painting and the description offered could also refer to other paintings by Brueghel housed at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, at least to the other two in the *Months* cycle. But, above all, the description of the scene portrayed in the painting is *distributed* within other parts of the novel, including elements present in the other two paintings of the Dutch master, as if, in the memory, the three paintings merged. We refer, in particular, to two other moments in *Frost*. In the first, after a deliberate fire has devastated a farm and emergency slaughters of animals, Strauch himself says he is like a *homo pictor*:

«“You see,” he said, “this tree comes on and says the line I told it to say, an incomprehensible line of poetry, a line that will turn the world on its head, a so-called line against God, you understand me! This tree walks on from the left, the cloud comes on from the right, the cloud with its softer voice. I view myself as the creator of this afternoon drama, this tragedy! This comedy! Now listen, the music has come in right on cue. The music plays on the difference between my words and all others. [...] Do you see *my theatre*? Do you see the theatre of apprehension? The theatre of God's un-self-sufficiency? What God?”»³⁵

Towards the end of the novel, the scene of the slaughter returns in a sub-chapter entitled *The Animal Rustling Scum* in which Strauch has discovered in the wood traces of blood from a clandestine slaughter. And he again claims his painting activity on the landscape:

«I want to call the scene ‘slaughter,’ in the moment I beheld it, everything seemed to soak into the picture. I could clearly see the butchers’ fleeing footprints. One could see also the tracks of the livestock they had stolen. One could see the darkness of the planets, and the low proletarianism of murder. I saw the word ‘innocent’ on the ground, in the snow, this low code, you must know, and the word ‘meanness’ clearly in the sky»³⁶

The word here *literally* takes the place of the image and imposes itself as the ultimate consequence of the visual construction of the scene. The image reveals the vulgarity and the obscenity of the massacre. At times almost the comicality. Strauch is divided between word and image as he is divided between tragic and comic.

In this sense, it appears to be appropriate to speak of an *iconoclastic ekphrasis*: a description of an image or a visual work which aims to demonstrate the impossibility for the image itself to contain the sense of what is represented. The consequence of this process is that words also become *things* and things to be seen: inscriptions in nature, natural histories which are ever-increasingly hard to decipher.

Both the paradoxical statute of *ekphrasis* and the construction of Strauch as *homo pictor* who cannot paint push us, in conclusion, to ascertain how articulate and complex the structural and thematic homologies between text and image are in *Frost*, to the point of sometimes rendering themes and structure inextricable. The ontological critique of the nature of the image is combined with Stifter's critique of the description of “beautiful nature”, and translates as a narration which is broken constantly before the fragmentariness and alongside the immensity of the natural phenomena. When, for example, Strauch imagines a park in which «Plants and music would follow

³⁴ Michele Cometa, *Letteratura e arti figurative: Un catalogo*, in “Contemporanea”, 3, 2005, pp. 15-29, p. 20: «In the case of literary *ekphrasis*, the distinction between *mimetic ekphrasis*, that is, that which starts from an artistic product which actually exists or existed and *notional ekphrasis*, which ‘creates’ its subject for the first time, is also decisive».

³⁵ Thomas Bernhard, *Frost*, cit., pp. 169-170.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

in lovely mathematical alternation», he also reveals the impossibility of crossing it, of passing from one meadow «island» to the next: “In each case, there is a breadth and depth of water that prevents one from hopping from one island to another. In my imagining. On the piece of grass which one has reached, how is a mystery, on which one has woken up, and where one is compelled to stay,” one would finally perish of hunger and thirst. “One’s longing to be able to walk through the whole park is finally deadly”³⁷. In the same way, Strauch’s topographies design the structure of the narration of the novel. In this sense, the thematic homologies between the images dreamed, indicated, constructed verbally, evoked, traced with the stick and the text also become structural homologies.

«European culture – wrote Boehm – has progressively increased the collection of images and with this the kingdom of presence too», gradually doing away with the space of the absent. «In the beautiful and new world of simulation –Boehm continues – we are actually working so that one day we can completely eliminate this space»³⁸. The renunciation of images by Strauch the painter is an act of revenge aiming to preserve and legitimise a space of absence. The resulting paradox is that the descriptions, rather than bringing text and image closer, actually serve to mark out the limits of representation in both.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 76.

³⁸ Gottfried Boehm, *Repräsentation-Präsentation-Präsenz. Auf den Spuren des homo pictor*, in Id., a cura di, *Homo Pictor. Commoquium Rauricum*, München-Leipzig, 2001, Band 7, pp. 3-13; Italian translation by M. G. Di Monte and M. Di Monte, *Rappresentazione-presentazione-presenza. Sulle tracce dell'homo pictor*, in Id., *La svolta iconica*, Rome, Meltemi, 2009, pp. 89-103, p. 94.