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Ruskin's Broken Middle

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BY JEREMY MELIUS
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I

"What would today's aesthetic education look like? And what kind of society would it be that valued aesthetic education among its projects?" These Ruskinian questions were posed by Isobel Armstrong in her provocative defense of *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000).[1] There Armstrong diagnoses a peculiar convergence of anti-aesthetic stances during the early 1980s. In a moment that "saw late capitalism in a new phase of confident aggrandizement," Thatcherite policies in the UK cut public funding for the arts and recast them as superfluous luxuries (45). Meanwhile, otherwise antithetical trends in left-leaning academia—the Marxist interventions of Terry Eagleton, the post-structuralist gambits of Derrida and de Man—coincided in their casting of the whole category of the aesthetic under suspicion: an engine for oppression of the working classes, or else the residue of bourgeois humanist mystification. In response, Armstrong seeks to "forge … the components of an alternative aesthetic discourse" through acute readings of anti-aesthetic figures, combined with "act[s] of redescribing" the terms of engagement, setting the stage for marvelously individual speculations of her own. Central to her account are concepts of mediation and play, both of which prove hostile to the stabilization of categories. In its "ceaseless inventiveness," play unfixed the security of set roles, "mak[ing] an experimental space for living (and perhaps for dying)" (1, 57–58). If the echoes of John Stuart Mill's "experiments of living" signals the broadly liberal underpinnings of Armstrong's approach, mediation opens onto darker spaces of possibility.[2] Here she draws from the "revisionary Hegelianism" of Gillian Rose:

> Customary accounts of mediation propose that knowledge comes about when the mind moves between opposites, which reciprocally change relationship to one another. Rose, on the contrary, replaces what she sees as a triumphalist dialectic of resolution moving to a new synthesis, with a logic of breakdown. It is at the point of contradiction, where opposites fail to transform one another, that intellectual struggle is at its most perilous and stressful, and where a painful restructuring of relationships comes about at the site of the middle, the third term. (17)

It is in and as this space of the "broken middle" that Armstrong locates her redescribed, radical aesthetic.[3] And it is here that I wish to locate Ruskin's own engagement with the mediations entailed by works of visual art. For the Victorian critic, too, art offers sites for restructuring of relationships, sometimes pleasurable, sometimes full of pain. The experience of painting might also constitute "a vital moment of breakdown"—"a transitive, interactive form," out of which "new possibilities emerge" (61, 59). This is a matter of affinity rather than identity, of course: I will not be suggesting a one-to-one relation

between Armstrong and Ruskin. Nonetheless, it is Ruskin's drive to write that ongoing breakdown, I want to suggest, that makes him worth attending to—his ability to present the artwork as a dynamic process of negotiation rather than a fixed and static monument, sealed off from involvement in a wider world.[4]

This unfolded, in Ruskin's prose, as a romance of the particular. However formidable his analytic skills, his attention always gravitated back towards the specificities of phenomena, drawing him ever closer to what he sought to describe. Indeed, his most searching modes of thinking took place in such moments of immersive, fine-grained attention, seeming to unfold almost accidentally in relation to its object, not quite under his conscious control. Such moments of intensive description occur most often in rapid, piecemeal fashion throughout his work—flashes of particularity that constitute fragments of larger arguments. But their dynamics can perhaps best be followed in rarer episodes of slower, more sustained description. If Ruskin's accounts of the two paintings I will be focusing on—William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1853) and Vittore Carpaccio's *The Dream of St. Ursula* (1495)—are unusual in their completeness, the work they accomplish proves characteristic of his procedures at large (figs. 1–2). Each stages the problem of mediation (in Armstrong's expanded sense) within the space of a room partially open to an outside world: rooms that are sites of exchange and exposure, contemplation and horror, sleep and waking, dream and nightmare, all traversed by the problems that gendered relations pose.[5] And each enables Ruskin to place himself within that fraught terrain. Description offers a way to come to grips with painting's mediations. It proposes itself as a site for such thinking-over and working-through, with a mixture of conscious and unconscious energies, and an intertwining of feeling and thought. At highest pitch, description also becomes, for Ruskin, a medium of performative self-assertion and self-loss.

Figure 1. William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*, 1853. Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 55.9 cm. Tate Gallery, London.

In itself, of course, the kind of work description undertakes should not be overdramatized. Description can be ordinary and unmysterious, and most often is. But even ordinary practices have their complexities, and without

falling into mystification, I do wish to suggest something of the sensitivity, nuance, and unstable intensity that makes Ruskin's own practice so magnetic. A longer study would be required to set his approach to artworks in a fully comparative context, detailing how exactly it differed from those of his predecessors and contemporaries, or to bring into view the extent to which his modes of description shaped the critic's wider political, economic, and ethical points of view. Here I wish to stay focused on that zone of interface between the porous boundary of the artwork and its partially integrated world. I do so in the belief that by concentrating attention here, on the actual mechanisms of attachment and distinction at the edge of the work of art, the particular interest of Ruskin's descriptive encounters might emerge. As Jay Fellows once put it, "Ruskin's books, his articles, his lectures are not enclosed. They are like his rooms, which always have views."[6] Something of that extensiveness and enabling provisionality characterizes his encounters with painting, too. Offering neither finality nor enclosure, Ruskin's descriptions, at their best, propose the artwork as a site of transfer: the place where openings occur.

Figure 2. Vittore Carpaccio, *The Dream of Saint Ursula*, 1495. Tempera on canvas, 274 x 267 cm. Gallerie dell' Accademia, Venice.

II

In May 1854, Ruskin wrote a pair of letters to the London *Times* in defense of two paintings by William Holman Hunt, then on display at the Royal Academy. The first, appearing on May 5, addressed the symbolism of *The Light of the World* (1853), laying out what the critic called "its palpable interpretation" (fig. 3).[7] (Here I illustrate the second, smaller version of the work, now in Manchester.) Ruskin wished to register the "deep impression" produced by the picture's own suggestions of meaning—for "Mr. Hunt has never explained his work to me"—but also its significance for questions of interpretation more generally. His account moves effortlessly between exegesis and surface-level description. Christ stands at a threshold, ready to gain entry through a fastened door—the "door of the human soul," which he "approaches … in the night-time." Ruskin seems particularly drawn to the painting's uncanny illumination, shining over the highly particularized scene. From the lantern in Christ's hand, "[i]ts fire … red and fierce," shines the "light of conscience." From

his crown of thorns radiates the unearthly light of "hope"—"sad, subdued, and full of softness," and "yet so powerful that it entirely melts into the glow of it the forms of the leaves and boughs." As Christ turns to face outwards, Ruskin imagines the painting's audience troubled by its mode of address. For people "so long accustomed to see pictures painted without any purpose or intention whatsoever," the "unexpected existence of meaning in a work of art" no doubt comes as a shock, Ruskin suggests:

> But in a few years more I hope the English public may be convinced of the simple truth, that neither a great fact, nor a great man, nor a great poem, nor a great picture, nor any other great thing, can be fathomed to the very bottom in a moment of time; and that no high enjoyment, either in picture-seeing or any other occupation, is consistent with total lethargy of the powers of the understanding. (12:329–30)

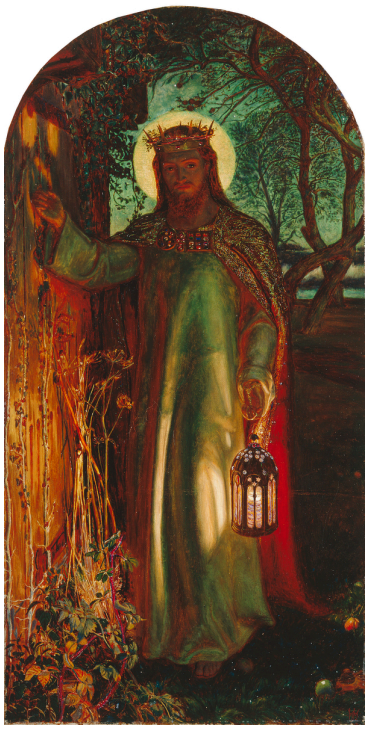

Figure 3. William Holman Hunt, *The Light of the World*, 1851–6. Oil on canvas, 49.8 x 26.1 cm. Manchester Art Gallery.

Ruskin's exasperation at what he took to be the public's learned assumption of art's meaninglessness is characteristic of his stance at this period. As remedy, he stresses the time and care that proper attention to meaning involves, and the necessity of exerting effortful "powers of understanding" within interpretation's extended temporality.[8] This emphasis sets the scene for a second letter, appearing on May 25. Offered as an addendum, almost an afterthought, to his account of "Mr. Hunt's principal picture," Ruskin now lingers even more emphatically over the artist's second entry to the exhibition, *The Awakening Conscience* (1853), taking the painstaking work of interpretation back up (12:333).

This letter quickly emerged as the more famous and provocative of the two.[9] Given the text's intricacy and force, it is worth quoting in full:

> Sir,—Your kind insertion of my notes on Mr. Hunt's principal picture encourages me to hope that you may yet allow me room in your columns for a few words respecting his second work in the Royal Academy, the

"Awakening Conscience." Not that this picture is obscure, or its story feebly told. I am at a loss to know how its meaning could be rendered more distinctly, but assuredly it is not understood. People gaze at it in a blank wonder, and leave it hopelessly; so that, though it is almost an insult to the painter to explain his thoughts in this instance, I cannot persuade myself to leave it thus misunderstood. The poor girl has been sitting singing with her seducer; some chance words of the song, "Oft in the stilly night," have struck upon the numbed places of her heart; she has started up in agony; he, not seeing her face, goes on singing, striking the keys carelessly with his gloved hand.

I suppose that no one possessing the slightest knowledge of expression could remain untouched by the countenance of the lost girl, rent from its beauty into sudden horror; the lips half open, indistinct in their purple quivering; the teeth set hard; the eyes filled with the fearful light of futurity, and with tears of ancient days. But I can easily understand that to many persons the careful rendering of the inferior details in this picture cannot but be at first offensive, as calling their attention away from the principal subject. It is true that detail of this kind has long been so carelessly rendered, that the perfect finishing of it becomes a matter of curiosity, and therefore an interruption to serious thought. But, without entering into the question of the general propriety of such treatment, I would only observe that, at least in this instance, it is based on a truer principle of the pathetic than any of the common artistical expedients of the schools. Nothing is more notable than the way in which even the most trivial objects force themselves upon the attention of a mind which has been fevered by violent and distressful excitement. They thrust themselves forward with a ghastly and unendurable distinctness, as if they would compel the sufferer to count, or measure, or learn them by heart. Even to the mere spectator a strange interest exalts the accessories of a scene in which he bears witness to human sorrow. There is not a single object in all that room—common, modern, vulgar (in the vulgar sense, as it may be), but it becomes tragical, if rightly read. That furniture so carefully painted, even to the last vein of the rosewood—is there nothing to be learnt from that terrible lustre of it, from its fatal newness; nothing there that has the old thoughts of home upon it, or that is ever to become a part of home? Those embossed books, vain and useless—they also new—marked with no happy wearing of beloved leaves; the torn and dying bird upon the floor; the gilded tapestry, with the fowls of the air feeding on the ripened corn; the picture above the fireplace, with its single drooping figure—the woman taken in adultery; nay, the very hem of the poor girl's dress, at which the painter has laboured so closely, thread by thread, has story in it, if we think how soon its pure whiteness may be soiled with dust and rain, her out-cast feet falling in the street; and the fair garden flowers, seen in the reflected sunshine of the mirror,—these also have their language—

"Hope not to find delight in us, they say,
For we are spotless, Jessy—we are pure."

I surely need not go on. Examine the whole range of the walls of the Academy,— nay, examine those of all our public and private galleries,— and, while pictures will be met with by the thousand which literally tempt to evil, by the thousand which are directed to the meanest trivialities of incident or emotion, by the thousand to the delicate fancies of inactive religion, there will not be found one powerful as this to meet full in the front the moral evil of the age in which it is painted; to waken into mercy the cruel thoughtlessness of youth, and subdue the severities of judgment into the sanctity of compassion.

I have the honour to be, Sir,
Your obedient servant,
THE AUTHOR OF "MODERN PAINTERS" (12:333–35)

Faced with the authority performed in Ruskin's movements between description and exhortation, readers have often been tempted to take the letter's account of Hunt's picture as seamlessly coherent, all one thing. But the text is riven with difficulties and contradictions. From the beginning, it traces a trajectory from the viewer's "blank wonder" to proper apprehension, just as the "cruel thoughtlessness of youth" will be "waken[ed] into mercy" at the letter's end. But in the midst of this—in the picture itself, as Ruskin describes it—the process of "awakening" looks far more disturbing. The woman's face is "rent from its beauty into sudden horror; the lips half open, indistinct in their purple quivering; the teeth set hard." Such visceral immediacy seems to have been too disturbing for the picture's first owner, Thomas Fairbairn, and Hunt later modified the face at his request. As a result, we cannot now know for certain what Ruskin saw in 1854. But whatever he did see left its mark on the texture of his prose. The sentence immediately retreats from the instant of overwhelming sensation to the wider temporal reaches of worry and regret, pointed towards "the fearful light of futurity, and … tears of ancient days." As a whole, the sentence can be seen to trace the unfolding tribulations of a viewer's direct encounter, from the self-assurance of knowledge to the unnerving moment of horror—the woman's horror, but taking place in the viewer's own—and on to a moment of recuperative rebalancing and distancing: a looking-ahead and looking-back that, however upsetting, works to temper horror's immediate charge. At its center, the sentence stages a momentary shudder, the "indistinct[ion]" and "quivering" of identification between seer and seen. Horror constitutes a point of contact in the sentence. A semicolon holds us there.

Ruskin's text both invites and defends against this unsettling intimacy between painting and viewer. His description draws energy from the possibility of collapse, enabling a renegotiation of boundaries. It imagines uninitiated viewers to be "offen[ded]" by the overly "careful rendering of the inferior details"—an "interruption to serious thought." But only so Ruskin can claim that Hunt must have had exactly such interruption in mind: "even the most trivial objects force themselves upon the attention of a mind which has been fevered by violent and distressful excitement," he says. And here again, Ruskin lingers: "They thrust themselves forward with a ghastly and unendurable distinctness, as if they would compel the sufferer to count, or measure, or learn them by heart." In terms of the letter's arguments, this second sentence adds little. What it conveys instead is a surplus of pathos, drawing things out as it holds the reader before the "ghastly" and "unendurable" scene, almost luxuriating in the unbearable impression it conveys.[10] Once again, Ruskin holds us within the moment of encounter. And again, that moment is one in which distance breaks down. The passage invites readers to feel their way into the painted woman's fevered state: surely the objects of the room would loom up with such intensity for her. But within the space of depiction, she cannot see what we see. Her face and body are turned away from the objects we notice too acutely; her gaze is abstracted from the scene. Have we arrived a moment too late to apprehend what the protagonist herself has just glimpsed around her, missing the instant of awakening itself?[11] Or has her vision somehow been rerouted through ours, the act of seeing neither quite hers nor our own?[12]

As in the miniature events of the sentence describing the figure's face, here too a disturbing intimacy is both dramatized and defended against. Ruskin's hybrid figure of the woman-viewer—note how "a mind" and "the sufferer" fail to specify gender—offers an analogue to the disturbing conjunction of man and woman in the painting, a double-figure which Caroline Arscott has memorably likened to the traumatic vision of the Wolf Man's primal scene in

Freud, with its mixture of scopophilic pleasure and anxious pain.[13] In the very next sentence, however, after this moment of collapse, Ruskin insists on distinction between painting and viewer: "Even to the mere spectator a strange interest exalts the accessories of a scene in which he bears witness to human sorrow."[14] The bonds between them are severed by the introduction of the "mere spectator"—"he"—a figure of disidentification, who would gaze at the painting uninvolved. Having come too close, it seems, Ruskin's description now attempts to back away. From sentence to sentence, a moment of horrifying intimacy has been introduced, lingered over, and then mitigated as best the passage can, with the reintroduction of a more distanced point of view.

As if to shore up those newly regained distinctions, the objects that had "thrust themselves forward" so unbearably become signs to be "rightly read." Ruskin's "mere spectator" has become a reader, impassioned but also knowing, exercising cool powers of intellection. Ruskin's account of the message these "rightly read" things might convey echoes a famous passage of "The Nature of Gothic" from *The Stones of Venice* (1851–53). There, he exhorts his reader to "look round this English room of yours, about which you have been proud so often … Examine again all those accurate mouldings, and perfect polishings, and unerring adjustments of the seasoned wood and tempered steel. … [I]f *read rightly*, these perfectnesses are signs of … slavery"—that is, the soul-destroying conditions of modern industrial production (10:193, emphasis added). In the letter on *The Awakening Conscience*, however, the "fatal newness" of the furnishings corresponds less directly to the woman's moral situation. Rather than being direct products of abhorrent processes, they serve as their secondary signs. Their import to the scenes seems less to do with the actual conditions of manufacture than with a more generalized atmosphere of iniquity within the environment, spatial as well as social. And this loosening up of the association is itself of interest. For the woman's situation proves not to be hers alone. Here again, distinctions between viewer and painting, male and female personae, begin to come undone. "Fatal newness" embodies the collapsed, claustrophobic temporality of the present. What she has awakened to, the letter seems to say, through recognition of her enmeshment in the hypocrisies of patriarchal industrial modernity, is her involvement in the relations that make up the wider social world—relations to which neither this room stuffed with things nor her own person remain impermeable.

In this way, as Ruskin's letter implies, the painting figures a moment of opening, an undoing of fantasies of autonomy or closure. In the moral message he discovers in Hunt's configuration, the critic allegorizes the conditions of painting's position in the world. But as I have been suggesting, Ruskin's letter also seeks in part to defend against the full implications of what he sees. Semantic coherence works to secure moral distance—a kind of uninvolvement with the scene. But distance is always breaking down. The reverberations of the moment of incoherent identification continue to be felt, structuring the encounter as a whole. It would be tempting to psychologize this scenario, finding in it some pathology of Ruskin's own. But this would be to miss the significance of what his text's behavior towards the painting in fact performs. For writing the encounter in the way his letter does, Ruskin offers a glimpse of the actual unsettlement—the "brokenness"—encounter entails. As we read the text, its defensive gestures come to be seen, precisely, *as* defensive; and therefore they offer a glimpse at other possible scenes.[15] Even as the familiar narrative of "the fallen woman" is recouped, the seductions of the letter's language—its sheer rhetorical force—also perform moments of

vital breakdown. Relations are restructuring; the ground begins to shift. The writer and his pictorial double pause there, awake.

III

In 1872, Ruskin turned to another room replete with significance, presenting similar questions regarding viewers' involvement with pictures, and the permeable threshold between painting and the outside world. On July 3 of that year, while staying in Venice, he set out to write the twentieth installment of *Fors Clavigera*, his *Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*, issued in the form of pamphlets between 1871 and 1884. As the letter developed over the next two days, it would find its center in a remarkable description of Vittore Carpaccio's *The Dream of St. Ursula* (1495). Carpaccio had painted this canvas for the Confraternity of St. Ursula in Venice—the commission came in 1489—part of a larger cycle depicting the saint's life and martyrdom. The daughter of an early Christian king (either from Britain or Brittany according to different versions of the legend), Ursula had agreed to marry a pagan prince to ensure his conversion, travelling with 11,000 virgin handmaidens to visit him and make a pilgrimage to Rome. On the party's return from Rome, they arrived in Cologne during a siege by the Huns, where Ursula and her companions were martyred on October 21, 383. Intended for the Scuola di SS Giovanni e Paolo, by the nineteenth century Carpaccio's painting of this early scene of the legend had taken its place in the Gallerie dell'Accademia, where Ruskin first took serious notice of it in 1869. "This Carpaccio is a new world to me," he wrote to Edward Burne-Jones at the time, initiating a decade of description, study, and fantastic investment.16 It was the story of that first encounter that *Fors* 20 looked back to, weaving through it another set of reflections on the conditions of modern life.

Ruskin's description of the painting occurs within an expansive discussion of other matters and is best approached in light of that wider context. In retrospect, Ruskin titled *Fors* 20 "Benediction," privileging the gentle capaciousness of Carpaccio's scene.17 For the letter as a whole, though, it was a counterintuitive choice. Oblique as they are, its main topic would seem to concern malediction, asking why workmen are so prone to curse. Ruskin suggests they do so unknowingly, almost automatically, because they find themselves cursed by modernity, forced into practices of labor that "cursing seems at present the most effectual means" of driving on, and which "any form of effectual blessing would hinder instead of help" (27:340). But already the analytic distinctions of that argument grow muddy. The implied slippage in tense and voice here (cursing to cursed) corresponds to a latent form of wordplay across the letter as a whole. At its start, Ruskin defends an earlier installment of his letters, *Fors* 19 (July 1872), in which he called "the whistling of the Lido steamer 'accursed'": "I never wrote more considerately," he claims, by way of introducing "several things … of importance for you to know, about blessing and cursing" (27:334). Treatment of the act of "blessing," meanwhile, blends into description of being "blessed" (27:336, 340ff). And Ruskin frames discussion of the whole with a quotation from the Book of James:

> Some of you may perhaps remember the saying of St. James about the tongue: "Therewith bless we God, and therewith curse we men; out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be." (27:334)

Subjects and objects of grammatical agency change place; blessing and cursing proceed out of the same mouth. These complexities unfold out of real

questions for Ruskin concerning the efficacy of language and its attendant states of being. If I am cursed, who or what curses me? Does blessing bring blessing upon me? Is it an act (a creation of blessedness) or a sign (of blessedness already bestowed)? *Fors* 20 was meant to sort such matters out.

In doing so, the text would take its place within the larger, often chaotic architecture of *Fors Clavigera*, the most dispersive of Ruskin's major texts. Of the various themes *Fors* took up during its long, peripatetic run, the question of agency remained central: was it possible to fully live a modern life or could one only suffer it? Against this second possibility, *The Dream of St. Ursula* was meant to embody a countervailing force: a picture of life under blessing. But the oppositions would not hold. Ruskin's description of the painting instead takes its place at the center of an expansive network of multivalent correspondences, pieced together fitfully and under strain. For his letter continually dramatizes its own writing's interruption by contingent events in its environment, locating Ruskin within a complex of distractions. Perhaps never had a text positioned itself as more porous to the world. Already on its second page, the din of a "little screw steamer" calls him away from his desk. The cry of a boy selling "something black out of a basket on the quay" further interrupts Ruskin's writing of this interruption, and draws him away again:

> Before I had finished writing that last sentence, the cry of a boy selling something black out of a basket on the quay became so sharply distinguished above the voices of the always debating gondoliers, that I must needs stop again, and go down to the quay to see what he had got to sell. They were half-rotten figs, shaken down, untimely, by the midsummer storms: his cry of "Fighiaie" scarcely ceased, being delivered, as I observed, just as clearly between his legs, when he was stooping to find an eatable portion of the black mess to serve a customer with, as when he was standing up. His face brought the tears into my eyes, so open, and sweet, and capable it was; and so sad. I gave him three very small halfpence, but took no figs, to his surprise: he little thought how cheap the sight of him and his basket was to me, at the money; nor what this fruit "that could not be eaten, it was so evil," sold cheap before the palace of the Dukes of Venice, meant, to any one who could read signs, either in earth, or her heaven and sea. (27:335–36)

If the noisy steamer figures the abrasions of modernity, this second interruption risked falling out of the didactic frame. The boy's presence, amplified by his cry, becomes a point of fixation in the text, and whatever thematic relevance he may have (the juxtaposition of bodily vulnerability with the unfeeling machine, say) risks becoming lost, one digression too many.[18] And so, as if to secure the figure's meaning, Ruskin once again insists on a practice of "read[ing] signs." Description gives way to typology.[19] Ruskin links the boy's "untimely" figs—"this fruit, 'that could not be eaten, it was so evil'"—with ominous biblical citations. "'And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig-tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind.'—Rev. vi. 13; compare Jerem. xxiv. 8, and Amos viii. 1 and 2," reads Ruskin's footnote to the passage (27:336). Typological significance implies the stability of a cosmic architecture, one in which historical situations are saturated with meaning by their constellation with each other. And yet, they also destabilize the event they proceed from. Shot through with past and future meanings, the present tense—the lived time—of the incident risks evacuation. As Jay Fellows suggests, "[t]he typological structure, bearing out and fulfilling, eliminates the middle."[20] In this case, the density of the

encounter itself, between Ruskin the wealthy Englishman and the poor Italian boy, would be evaporated into unearthly significance.

Or so things might unfold. Ruskin's text, however, seems to sabotage its own moving-on from the figure, in ways that recall his letter of 1854. If typological meaning inheres in the figs, something else occurs in relation to the boy's person. His young body, set against the ancient architecture of the Ducal Palace, stands unknowing and unknown, alienated from a history that ought to be his birthright as well as from the apocalyptic signs he now proffers. Doubly isolated in the instant, constellation only comes in the encounter with Ruskin: a "face" that "brought the tears into my eyes." At the passage's heart, Ruskin finds himself impinged upon, touched. As with the *Awakening Conscience*, so again here, his writing shows itself working to restage and recover from the intensity of the punctual visual encounter.

Seen from this vantage, when the steam-whistle of the *Capo d'Istria* distracts Ruskin from his writing once again, this third interruption begins to feel almost inevitable. The whistle chases him from his intricate meditations on blessing, cursing, and their relation to human labor with its incessant message of "now," "going through my head like a knife":

> Do you suppose that when it is promised [in Isaiah 35:6] that "the lame man shall leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing"—(Steam-whistle interrupts me from the *Capo d'Istria*, which is lying in front of my window with her black nose pointed at the red nose of another steamer at the next pier. There are nine large ones at this instant,—half-past six, morning, 4th July,—lying between the Church of the Redeemer and the Canal of the Arsenal; one of them an ironclad, five smoking fiercely, and the biggest,—English and half a quarter of a mile long,—blowing steam from all manner of pipes in her sides, and with such a roar through her funnel—whistle number two from *Capo d'Istria*—that I could not make any one hear me speak in this room without an effort),—do you suppose, I say, that such a form of benediction is just the same as saying that the lame man shall leap as a lion, and the tongue of the dumb mourn? Not so, but a special manner of action of the members is meant in both cases: (whistle number three from *Capo d'Istria*; I am writing on, steadily, so that you will be able to form an accurate idea, from this page, of the intervals of time in modern music. The roaring from the English boat goes on all the while, for bass to the *Capo d'Istria's* treble, and a tenth steamer comes in sight round the Armenian Monastery)—a particular kind of activity is meant, I repeat, in both cases. The lame man is to leap, (whistle fourth from *Capo d'Istria*, this time at high pressure, going through my head like a knife) as an innocent and joyful creature leaps, and the lips of the dumb to move melodiously: they are to be blest, so; may not be unblest even in silence; but are the absolute contrary of blest, in evil utterance. (Fifth whistle, a double one, from *Capo d'Istria*, and it is seven o'clock, nearly; and here's my coffee, and I must stop writing. Sixth whistle—the *Capo d'Istria* is off, with her crew of morning bathers. Seventh,—for I don't know which of the boats outside—and I count no more.) (27:341–42)

Both the ambition and the madness of this passage feel startling. The repeated whistle-blows mark an aggressive intrusion of "real" time into a text at pains to establish its ability to weather interruptions. "They thrust themselves forward," as Ruskin himself might put it, "compel[ling] the sufferer to count, or measure, or learn them by heart." The sounds' wild staging in parentheses seeks to represent the piercing temporality of interruption but also to bring about its taming in measure—"the intervals of time in modern music." Even within Ruskin's metaphor, however, it remains unclear whether he

presents himself as masterful composer or mere recording device. To what extent can we take "modern music" to be "evil utterance" itself? Do Ruskin's descriptions of benediction actualize the state? Here again, the drama of agency unfolds ambiguously. Critics have often wanted to assert rhetorical balance in the passage: Tim Hilton, for instance, writes of Ruskin orchestrating a masterly "counterpoint of peace with tumult, of grace with accursedness."[21] But such claims tend to domesticate the passage's unsettling effect. Indeed, whatever heroic persistence it attempts to summon in the face of modernity's onslaught, the grammatical and aural texture of the prose seem to offer no more stability than the counterposing figures of "Fighiaie" and "face." Ruskin wants his interruptions to be imbued with demonic significance. But they are too close to the *in*-significance of the steamer whistle for his balancing act to fully succeed. What is figure here and what is ground? The passage remains exhilarating in its aggressiveness, making frenzied demands on the reader's attention, patience, and memory. But who can really follow its meaning through to the end? We are left with irresolvable tension, Ruskin making a spectacle of his own wavering authority, losing the reader just where he most wishes to tighten control.

It is here, as the text resumes on July 5, that Carpaccio's painting appears:

> In the year 1869, just before leaving Venice, I had been carefully looking at a picture by Victor Carpaccio, representing the dream of a young princess. Carpaccio has taken much pains to explain to us, as far as he can, the kind of life she leads, by completely painting her little bedroom in the light of dawn, so that you can see everything in it. It is lighted by two doubly-arched windows. … They are filled at the top with small round panes of glass; but beneath, are open to the blue morning sky, with a low lattice across them: and in the one at the back of the room are set two beautiful white Greek vases with a plant in each; one having rich dark and pointed green leaves, the other crimson flowers … each at the end of a branch like a spray of heath. (27:342–43) [For Ruskin's full description, see the appendix below.]

Encountered at the threshold of his departure, Ruskin understands the painting to extend an expansive invitation to the viewer—an "ekphrastic suspension," as Jennifer Scappettone suggests.[22] The text unfurls as a coherent web of visual apprehension, tracing an eye's movement from window to wall to bed as it gently proceeds across virtual space. Something like a story spreads out before us, but one in which the onward momentum of narrative has been slowed. As Ruskin's description moves from one exactly observed detail to the next, it delivers a sense of direction without coercion. His easy circulation treats the room as if it might be real space—the actual setting of a life—perhaps even one which we might inhabit. When Ruskin notices that illumination fills the room through not one but "*two* doubly-arched windows," extrapolating the shape of the extremely foreshortened one top-right from the window we see head-on at the painting's center, the reader is delivered into the room's spaciousness. The painting's sheer size—nearly nine-feet square—encourages this gentle rhythm of investigation.

And yet, Ruskin's invitation to the reader does not extend to outright possession. Some aspects of the picture remain difficult to make out. On the wall opposite the foreshortened window, for instance, "a small shrine or picture (I can't see which, for it is in sharp retiring perspective)" reminds us of this pictorial world's actual conditions of visibility—its being a made thing. Moreover, even within the painting's fiction, the room is emphatically marked as St. Ursula's own. The "reading-table, some two feet and a half square,

covered by a red cloth with a white border and dainty fringe"; the "very small three-legged stool"; the "press full of books," "near the table, so as to be easily reached by the outstretched arm"; even the books it contains, "rather in disorder," Ruskin is "grieved to say … having been pulled about before the princess went to bed, and one left standing on its side": all these features speak to Ursula's bodily and spiritual presence distributed across the room (27:343). In the end, Ruskin suggests, the painting depicts her "Royal power over herself, and happiness in her flowers, her books, her sleeping, and waking, her prayers, her dreams, her earth, her heaven" (27:344–45). Ruskin even gives her dream-state imaginative control over the angel—another figure of interruption—who enters to call the young girl to her fate:

> It is very pretty of Carpaccio to make her dream out the angel's dress so particularly, and notice the slashed sleeves; and to dream so little an angel—very nearly a doll angel,—bringing her the branch of palm, and message. (27:344)

Ursula here becomes something like Ruskin's intra-pictorial proxy: her dreaming out "so particularly" stands in for his detail-oriented attentions. But she also stands in for Carpaccio's precisely managed decisions. The triangulation proves crucial. It reminds us that, for Ruskin, the incidents of the painting make up a space of fluid and multiple identifications—of pretty St. Ursula with pretty Carpaccio, of Ruskin with both. It describes a relational field that will never settle down into stable identities. Ruskin's imaginative sympathies with the figures he observed are essential to his stances as a writer and looker precisely because they remain so unfixed.[23] The multiplication of points of entry keep things in motion. Even at their most intense, Ruskin's identifications provided ways of thinking outside himself, of leaving the unitary self behind.

Take, for instance, the morbid undercurrents of Ruskin's description of the bed:

> The bed is a broad four-poster, the posts being beautifully wrought golden or gilded rods, variously wreathed and branched, carrying a canopy of warm red. … The coverlid is scarlet, the white sheet folded half-way back over it; the young girl lies straight, bending neither at waist nor knee, the sheet rising and falling over her in a narrow unbroken wave, like the shape of the coverlid of the last sleep, when the turf scarcely rises. (27:343–44)

The morbid association lingers on in the characterization of Ursula's head as "utterly calm in sleep, and almost colourless," and of her dreaming "with blessed eyes, that need no earthly dawn" (27:344). One might take such deathly intimations as personal, the projections of some half-concealed fantasy on Ruskin's part, were they not also so effective in staging the stillness of the picture and its calm. The effects allow for a form of narrative shading, too. They enable the angel's entrance to be felt for the uncanny pictorial event that it is, as he interrupts the quiet of the scene without disturbing a thing:

> At the door of the room an angel enters (the little dog, though lying awake, vigilant, takes no notice). … He has soft grey wings, lustreless. … He comes in without haste, his body, like a mortal one, casting shadow from the light through the door behind, his face perfectly quiet; a palm-branch in his right hand—a scroll in his left. (27:344)

The angel comes, after all, to summon Ursula to death. But somehow it is a death made continuous with the calm of sleep—with the gentleness of her life as it inhabits this space. Moving noiselessly through the room, he is the anti-*Capo d'Istria*. As if in emulation of the angel's quiet, Ruskin attempts to feel his way into the painting unobtrusively, allowing its meaning to unfold peacefully before our eyes. His description aims to achieve, however provisionally, intimacy without expropriation, a being-close that does not claim ownership of the scene.

What this delicate balance has to do with the apocalyptic intensity that had preceded it becomes clear as *Fors* 20 goes on. Following the description of Carpaccio's *Dream*, Ruskin resumes his narrative of leaving Venice in 1869: "After I had spent my morning over this picture, I had to go to Verona by the afternoon train." He recounts a journey shared in a compartment with two wealthy American girls. This closed cabin serves as the painting's unnerving "other scene"—a fantastic reconfiguration of Ursula's blessed room, the doubling of her figure the stuff of nightmares.[24] Ruskin makes his case: There is so much to see and contemplate on a train-journey from Venice to Verona—Portia's villa, Juliet's tomb, the hills in which Petrarch wrote about Laura—all models of idealized femininity, if only the American girls would look (27:345).[25] But they will not look: "They pulled down the blinds the moment they entered the carriage, and then sprawled, and writhed, and tossed among the cushions of it, in vain contest, during the whole fifty miles, with every miserable sensation of bodily affliction that could make time intolerable"; "The flies and the dust stuck to them as to clay, and they perceived, between Venice and Verona, nothing but the flies and the dust"; they travel "with sealed eyes and tormented limbs, their numbered miles of pain." The girls' sealed chamber contrasts utterly with the openness of St. Ursula's. They cannot see out, and no apparition will ever come in. "[N]either princesses, nor seers, nor dreamers," they become blind machines of pure sensation. "By infinite self-indulgence, they had reduced themselves simply to two pieces of white putty that could feel pain" (27:345–46).

The agitation of the passage is palpable, and hard not to read as sexualized. Ruskin's description waxes cruel and overexcited. But to what end? As with the excesses of the *Capo d'Istria*'s whistle, textual wildness signals the passage's impotence as action—its inability to curse the girls. Much as Ruskin would seem to wish to speak directly to them, at them, he can only write *about* them, and several years after the fact. Indeed, sadistic aggression is preempted by the girls' own actions, as when "[f]rom time to time they cut a lemon open, ground a lump of sugar backwards and forwards over it till every fibre was in a treacly pulp; then sucked the pulp, and gnawed the white skin into leathery strings for the sake of its bitter" (27:346). Their greedy, excessive behavior reads as an infernal involution of Ruskin's moment of identification with St. Ursula. Their consumptive appropriation of the world, sucking out its sweetness, travesties the gentle patience of Ruskin's desired approach. Their sensual thoroughness with sugar and teeth offers a grotesque refiguration of Ursula's (and Carpaccio's) depictive particularity—and thus also of the critic's process of attention, moving "so particularly" from detail to detail. The strange violence of their behavior also reads as a substitute for the doing of harm he might imagine. But such activity belongs to the girls, not to him. Cohabiting this space of theirs, exposed to such particularized forms of sensual stimulation and pleasure, the text figures the hellish passivity of merely witnessing.[26]

"There are the two states for you," Ruskin writes, "in clearest opposition; Blessed, and Accursed" (27:346). As if this could sum things up! But at stake here is more than a game of good and bad objects. The reversals and restagings at work across *Fors* 20 establish a weird reciprocity between its terms. Standing as an anti-type of the *Dream*, the episode on the train provides an outlet for the feverish intensity Ruskin's attention might entail. It gives description of the painting room to breathe. The collapsed temporality of the American girls' experience—a life of immediate gratification and "numbered" moments of pain—makes palpable the inviolable duration of St. Ursula's sleep. The girls' blindness lends itself to St. Ursula's "sight", even as it acknowledges the fact of her closed eyes.27 Their "thin white frocks, coming vaguely open at the backs as they stretched or wriggled" (27:346) sends us back to St. Ursula's scarlet "coverlid…, the white sheet folded half-way back over it," under which she "lies straight, bending neither at waist nor knee." The agitation of their "tormented limbs" works to describe her calm. His activity of postponed counter-description, as it were, both enriches Ruskin's account of the painting and opens it to juxtaposition with the life of modernity. "Blessed" and "Accursed" states meet, mingled uneasily in Ruskin's prose.

The account of the painting no doubt gains from this syphoning off of disturbance. Its effect of gentleness now can be seen to depend on the letter's distribution of feeling across the whole. Agitation happens elsewhere, allowing Ruskin to linger, for instance, with the complexity of St. Ursula's figure. "[H]er head … turned towards us on the pillow, the cheek resting on her hand, as if she were thinking, yet utterly calm in sleep," she is conscious and unconscious, seeing and unseeing, alive and dead (27:344). Fury at the Americans allows Ruskin's description its calm. But in the midst of their juxtaposition, aggression and contemplation also become versions of each other, circulating through a strangely intimate psychic economy of attention. Both scenes reach back even earlier in the letter, offering commentary on Ruskin's vulnerability in his own Venetian room. All these rooms open onto each other. And all link back to the letter's overarching questions of effective speech. Whenever Ruskin's language steers toward the performative, we might say, it stages its own inability to perform. Instead emerges the quieter power of Ruskin's constative mode—its gentle, unpossessive efficacy. Of course this is agony for Ruskin. Description, he believes, should lead on steadily to prescription—to making things happen in the world. But time and again, that "leading" leads nowhere. Out of such disappointments come new possibilities for descriptive relation. Neither quite active or passive, the attention Ruskin's descriptions perform might achieve a voice in some radical sense "middle," inhabiting, however provisionally, some self-reflexive space between.28 Disentangling itself from solipsism (despite foregrounding the self) as well as from possessiveness (despite its occasionally bossy tone), Ruskin's descriptive writing seems to imagine a mode of attention that would handle its objects lightly, moving over them even as it lets them be.

IV

Always restless, Ruskin would go on to revise his account of *The Dream of St. Ursula* over the following decade. The relations the painting opened up could never stay still. Twelve years later, however, at the far end of this engagement, such tensions seem to have ceased being productive. During "The Pleasures of England" in 1884, the last lectures of his second tenure as Oxford's Slade Professor of Fine Arts, Ruskin presented a watercolor copy of St. Ursula's face to Somerville College (then Somerville Hall), recently founded as one of the University's two women's colleges (fig. 4). As reconstructed by his editor, Ruskin's account nearly spins out of control in its production of associations:

> "And here," added Mr. Ruskin, turning to the … picture, "is a Spectral Girl—an idol of a girl—never was such a girl. … Never was twisted hair like hers—twisted, like that of all Venetian girls, in memory of the time when they first made their hair into ropes for the fugitive ships at Aquileia. You will never see such hair, nor such peace beneath it on the brow—*Pax Vobiscum*—the peace of heaven, of infancy, and of death. No one knows who she is or where she lived. She is Persephone at rest below the earth; she is Proserpine at play above the ground. She is Ursula, the gentlest yet the rudest of little bears; a type in that, perhaps, of the moss rose, or of the rose *spinosissima*, with its rough little buds. She is in England, in Cologne, in Venice, in Rome, in eternity, living everywhere, dying everywhere. … (33:507)

The lecture continues in this vein. It functions as a summing-up and a giving-away. St. Ursula's archetypical maidenhood, her materiality and spectrality, her liveliness and deathly presence—none of this will strike the reader of *Fors* 20 as surprising. But the lack of descriptive particularity might.[29] Ruskin's laying his past to rest, it would seem, required such loss. "Living everywhere, dying everywhere," the *Dream* loses place in Carpaccio's production and becomes subject to a seemingly uncontrollable play of substitutions.

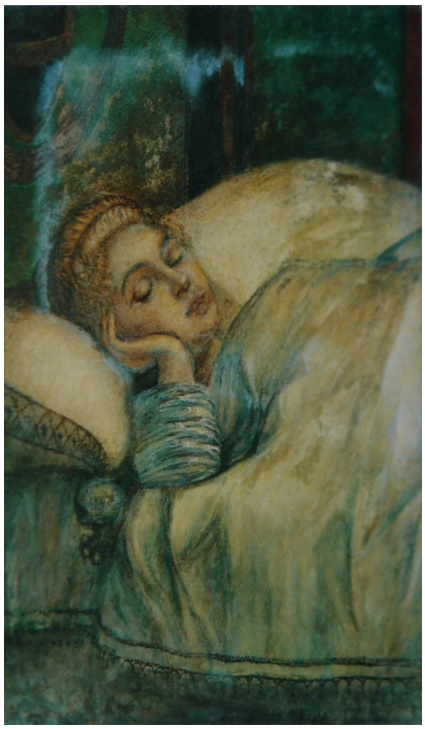

Figure 4. John Ruskin, *The Dream of Saint Ursula*, 1876–7. Watercolor and body color. Somerville College, Oxford.

Chief among them, by now, was an intractable association of the painting with Rose La Touche, dead at 27 in 1875, the most important love of Ruskin's life. (She appears here as "the moss rose," and as "the rose *spinosissima* [most thorny]," perhaps driving the simpering wordplay around Ursula's name.) Was she there all along? It is certainly the case that their difficult affair would become inextricably bound up with Ruskin's fixation on the painting.[30] A biographically determinant reading of *Fors* 20 would make much of the text's orchestration of libidinal energy. According to such a logic, everything that followed—every engagement with the picture on Ruskin's part—might be seen to play out as wince-inducing cliché.

I want to resist such logic, however—in part because Ruskin's texts themselves resist it, in the modes of attention they pay to the paintings they describe. Rather, I would suggest we see the biographical resonances of his text as one more form of mediation: the negotiation of self and other, yes, but also Armstrong's "constant negotiation of in-betweenness" beyond the "I"—"not a representation of the subject," as she puts it, "but the subject of representation, which is not a self, or an object, or a thematics, but the structuring movement of thought and feeling" (60, 17). The push and pull between projection and perception was, for Ruskin, enlivening. Fantastic association could offer one more instance of this painful, generative destabilization—one more way of describing the work's openness to the world.

Perhaps not in 1884, to be sure, when projection would seem to have won out. But in 1876, a year after Rose's untimely passing, description of the painting's deathliness would take center stage in a way that let the painting itself be newly seen. Letter 71 of *Fors Clavigera* (November 1876) revises Ruskin's own earlier description. The tables have turned, and creative agency now lies not with Ursula but with the angel who "comes to her, 'in the clear light of morning'; the Angel of Death" (fig. 5):

> There is no glory round his head; there is no gold on his robes; they are of subdued purple and grey. His wings are colourless—his face calm, but sorrowful,—wholly in shade. In his right hand he bears the martyr's palm; in his left, the fillet born by the Greek angels of victory, and together with it, gathers up, knotted in his hand, the folds of shroud with which the Etrurians veil the tomb. (28:744–45).

Figure 5. Vittore Carpaccio, *The Dream of Saint Ursula*, 1495 (detail of fig. 2).

If the revisions mark Ruskin's grief, perhaps, this is not the only logic in play. For they also bring us closer to discernible aspects of the *Dream*. The text introduces a new vocabulary of symbolic meaning—another form of "reading rightly." This offers the stability and authority of a correction to his "misreading" of Ursula's sovereign agency in 1872: the letter implies his failure to follow

through on his earlier allusions to the saint's death were an error that might be undone here. But revision, too, comes with a surplus of disruptive energy. Whatever new security Ruskin's proto-iconographic reading might entail is swiftly complicated by another, more severe form of exactitude. In an extraordinarily censorious footnote to the passage above, Ruskin stages the negation of his earlier sight:

> I could not see this symbol [the shroud] at the height at which the picture hung from the ground, when I described it in 1872. The folds of the drapery in the *hand* are all but invisible, even when the picture is seen close; and so neutral in their grey-green colour that they pass imperceptibly into violet, as the faint green of evening sky fades into purple. But the folds are continued under the wrist in the alternate waves which the reader may see on the Etruscan tomb in the first room of the British Museum, with a sculpturesque severity which I could not then understand, and could only account for by supposing that Carpaccio had meant the Princess to "dream out the angel's dress so particularly"! I mistook the fillet of victory also for a scroll; and could not make out the flowers in the window. … (28:744–45)

The note offers a whole litany of corrections, delivered with self-mockery of the kind that only incredulous self-quotation could provide. It is remarkable, too, the extent to which this retraction of Ruskin's former vision should involve a retraction of Ursula's as well. No longer "full of sacred imagination of things that are not" (27:346), her eyes are subject to a mortal angle of vision, a "real" seeing, against the realistic fall of light:

> St. Ursula is not meant, herself, to recognize the angel. He enters under the door over which she has put her little statue of Venus; and through that door the room is filled with light, so that it will not seem to her strange that his own form, as he enters, should be in shade; and she cannot see his dark wings. On the tassel of her pillow (Etrurian also) is written "Infantia"; and above her head, the carving of the bed ends in a spiral flame, typical of the finally ascending Spirit. She lies on her bier, in the last picture but one [in the series], exactly as here on her bed; only the coverlid is there changed from scarlet to pale violet. (28:745)

Key features of the scene remain invisible to her, and do not deliver meaning immediately. This heightens the sense of drama considerably. But it also offers a glimpse of a pattern of response I have been tracing. In slow motion, as it were, over the space of four years, the passage's revisions follow the movements observed in Ruskin's letter of 1854. Where the woman of *The Awakening Conscience* saw too much, now Ursula sees too little. Rather than the immediate intensity of a phobic reaction, we have a slower working out of the terms of relation, in which Ruskin's identifications are both continued and called into question. Even as the passage separates the viewer's experience from that of Ursula, dispersing the painting's points of view—what we see is not what she "sees"—it continues to suggest her identification with Ruskin's former self, now in negative terms. Like the vision of that self, subject to correction, St. Ursula's, too, is brought down to earth.

This confluence of self-correction, new observation, and prolonged identification becomes even stranger as the text goes on. The letter's tone grows darker and more obsessive:

> You see it is written in the legend that she had shut close the doors of her chamber.
> They have opened as the angel enters,—not one only, but all in the room, —all in the house. He enters by one at the foot of her bed; but beyond it is another—open into the passage; out of that another into some luminous hall or street [fig. 6]. All the window-shutters are wide open; they are made dark that you may notice them,—nay, all the press doors are open! No treasure bars shall hold, where *this* angel enters. (28:745)

Figure 6. Vittore Carpaccio, *The Dream of Saint Ursula*, 1495 (detail of fig. 2).

It is hard to know what to make of the aggressive, sexualized energies at play in this breathless passage. Its sentences seem both to relish and stand in horror at the angel's entry, and at the swinging open of Ursula's room to the world. Here, too, we seem called on to witness some enigmatic primal scene. Ruskin's unstable drama of identification goes on. Just as earlier he could find his most cherished self in Ursula—Ruskin's "Royal power over herself" underwriting his acts of attention—so now we may see Ruskin at least doubly identified: wishing his way into the angel before whom "no treasure bars shall hold," perhaps, but also watching his own chamber-body opened to encounter. Fantasmatic action spills over into its opposite, and Ruskin's own agency as seer and explicator is at once asserted and denied. If the passage exaggerates features of Ruskin's earlier description of the painting, it also allows us to bring its gendered dynamics into clearer view. For crucially, even as they center figurations of femininity, these ways of moving in and through the painting do not depend solely on some passive, porous "feminine" subject position in order to come alive. Other figures—other possibilities for the figure —arrive on the scene. The gendered forms of Ruskin's attachments vacillate, and this vacillation itself gives form to the instabilities driving his protracted aesthetic encounters. We brush up against a "structuring movement" (as Armstrong might put it) rather than a "self."

However unnerving the scenes it opens onto, Ruskin's excavation of the *Dream*'s deathliness and openness also emerges as a descriptive achievement, one that perhaps could only be accomplished with fantasy's

interlacing support. For the first time, in the description of 1876, we are asked to notice the complex passageway on the far side of Ursula's room, that analogue to the angel's entry, and it is striking indeed. It drives home just how self-consciously Carpaccio has transformed the iconography of the Annunciation in his painting, making use of its leitmotif of thresholds crossed. Compositionally, it allows us to see how deftly the passageway aerates the room. If the unseemly life of fantasy has a function here, it is a fantasy about the particularity of this complex pictorial space. The more significant empirical detail is discriminated in the painting, the more explicitly Ruskin's text seems to recognize its own central core of identifications, wishes, and fears. And in turn, such recognition only seems to further the work of careful observation and description.

The circuitry was intricate, and always on the verge of collapse. As time went on, it would do so all but completely, as Rose and St. Ursula became ever more intensely superimposed.31 But as I have been suggesting, breakdown might have always been the point. To be at the center of mediation—to inhabit or even somehow "be" that process—was to be nowhere. "Self and other are co-ordinates rather than fixed entities in the process of mediation," to cite Armstrong one more time, "but mediation does not necessarily require a negotiation between *self* and world at all" (60). The work of "dispersal and consolidation" (75) that Ruskin undertakes responds to the figures of stasis and closure that cultural artifacts have so often been forced to stand for in modern life, when they have been allowed to stand for anything at all. Against such ossification, his descriptions seek to reveal the forms of speculative mobility—representational, depictive, identificatory—to which artworks might always be giving form. In that sense, even their most quixotic feints achieve a new form of honesty about the relations between pictures and people, and about how those relations might productively be kept on the move. They perform a peculiar kind of "aesthetic education," if you like, drawing readers out, looking close and looking away and looking back again. The strange, recursive play of Ruskin's texts does not so much give new life to paintings as reveal the forms of life already there.

Appendix: Description of *The Dream of St. Ursula* in *Fors Clavigera* Letter 20, August 1872:

In the year 1869, just before leaving Venice, I had been carefully looking at a picture by Victor Carpaccio, representing the dream of a young princess. Carpaccio has taken much pains to explain to us, as far as he can, the kind of life she leads, by completely painting her little bedroom in the light of dawn, so that you can see everything in it. It is lighted by two doubly-arched windows, the arches being painted crimson round their edges, and the capitals of the shafts that bear them, gilded. They are filled at the top with small round panes of glass; but beneath, are open to the blue morning sky, with a low lattice across them: and in the one at the back of the room are set two beautiful white Greek vases with a plant in each; one having rich dark and pointed green leaves, the other crimson flowers, but not of any species known to me, each at the end of a branch like a spray of heath.

These flower-pots stand on a shelf which runs all round the room, and beneath the window, at about the height of the elbow, and serves to put things on anywhere: beneath it, down to the floor, the walls are covered with green cloth; but above, are bare and white. The second window is nearly opposite the bed, and in front of it is the princess's reading-table, some two feet and a half square, covered by a red cloth with a white border and dainty

fringe; and beside it her seat, not at all like a reading-chair in Oxford, but a very small three-legged stool like a music-stool, covered with crimson cloth. On the table are a book set up at a slope fittest for reading, and an hour-glass. Under the shelf, near the table, so as to be easily reached by the outstretched arm, is a press full of books. The door of this has been left open, and the books, I am grieved to say, are rather in disorder, having been pulled about before the princess went to bed, and one left standing on its side.

Opposite this window, on the white wall, is a small shrine or picture (I can't see which, for it is in sharp retiring perspective) with a lamp before it, and a silver vessel hung from the lamp, looking like one for holding incense.

The bed is a broad four-poster, the posts being beautifully wrought golden or gilded rods, various wreathed and branched, carrying a canopy of warm red. The princess's shield is at the head of it, and the feet are raised entirely above the floor of the room, on a dais which projects at the lower end so as to form a seat, on which the child has laid her crown. Her little blue slippers lie at the side of the bed,—her white dog beside them. The coverlid is scarlet, the white sheet folded half-way back over it; the young girl lies straight, bending neither at waist nor knee, the sheet rising and falling over her in a narrow unbroken wave, like the shape of the coverlid of the last sleep, when the turf scarcely rises. She is some seventeen or eighteen years old, her head is turned towards us on the pillow, the cheek resting on her hand, as if she were thinking, yet utterly calm in sleep, and almost colourless. Her hair is tied with a narrow riband, and divided into two wreaths, which encircle her head like a double crown. The white nightgown hides the arm raised on the pillow, down to the wrist.

At the door of the room an angel enters (the little dog, though lying awake, vigilant, takes no notice). He is a very small angel, his head just rises a little above the shelf round the room, and would only reach as high as the princess's chin, if she were standing up. He has soft grey wings, lusterless; and his dress, of subdued blue, has violet sleeves, open above the elbow, and showing white sleeves below. He comes in without haste, his body, like a mortal one, casting shadow from the light through the door behind, his face perfectly quiet; a palm-branch in his right hand—a scroll in his left.

So dreams the princess, with blessed eyes, that need no earthly dawn. It is very pretty of Carpaccio to make her dream out the angel's dress so particularly, and notice the slashed sleeves; and to dream so little an angel—very nearly a doll angel,—bringing her the branch of palm, and message. But the lovely characteristic of all is the evident delight of her continual life. Royal power over herself, and happiness in her flowers, her books, her sleeping, and waking, her prayers, her dreams, her earth, her heaven.

After I had spent my morning over this picture, I had to go to Verona by the afternoon train. … (27:342–45)

Notes

1. Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 80. Hereafter cited in the text followed by the page number.
2. "As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so it is that there should be different experiments of living," John Stuart Mill, "On Liberty (1859)," in *Essays on Politics and Society vol. A*, vol. 18 of *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson (London: Routledge, 1996), 260–61.
3. See especially "Writing from the Broken Middle: Post-Structuralist Deconstruction," Armstrong, *Radical Aesthetic*, 45–81. Armstrong draws closely on Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford UK and Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1992).

4. As David Russell puts it: "One of Ruskin's intellectual consistencies is in his desire to know how things that had been divided in perception could be joined together again, and how the disavowed links between people, and between people and the world, might be shown," David Russell, "How to Face Reality: Ruskin, Freud, Winnicott," *Raritan* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2021), 134. My understanding of Ruskin is fully in sympathy with Russell's account.

5. As Armstrong comments, "Rose does not gender the broken middle. … But one might argue that because of their place in our culture the broken middle is where women tend to be." Armstrong, *Radical Aesthetic*, 80.

6. Jay Fellows, *The Failing Distance: The Autobiographical Impulse in John Ruskin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), vii.

7. John Ruskin, "The Light of the World," in *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903–12), 12:329. Hereafter cited in text followed by the volume and page number.

8. This extended timeframe of interpretation corresponds to the "laborious realiz[ation]" of the Pre-Raphaelite painting's "conceptions" that Ruskin emphasizes at the letter's beginning: Ruskin, *Works*, 12:329.

9. The two most influential modern readings of Hunt's painting both engage explicitly with Ruskin's account, taking it to task: see Caroline Arscott, "Employer, Husband, Spectator: Thomas Fairbairn's Commission of *The Awakening Conscience*," in *The Culture of Capital: Art, Power and the Nineteenth-century Middle Class*, ed. Janet Wolff and John Seed (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 159–90; and Kate Flint, "Reading *The Awakening Conscience* Rightly," in *Pre-Raphaelites Re-viewed*, ed. Marcia Pointon (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), 45–65.

10. The thoughts Ruskin expresses here seemed important enough to restate at least twice, and with a similar rhythm of intensity, as the 1850s went on. In the third lecture of "The Two Paths" (1859) he emphasizes the strange exaggeration of attention that distress can bring: "Again Remember that when the imagination and feelings are strongly excited, they will not only bear with strange things, but they will *look* into *minute* things with a delight quite unknown in hours of tranquility. You surely must remember moments of your lives in which, under some strong excitement of feeling, all the details of visible objects presented themselves with a strange intensity and insistence, whether you would or no; urging themselves upon the mind, and thrust upon the eye, with a force of fascination which you could not refuse. Now, to a certain extent, the senses get into this state whenever the imagination is strongly excited. Things trivial at other times assume a dignity or significance which we cannot explain; but which is only the more attractive because inexplicable: and the powers of attention, quickened by the feverish excitement, fasten and feed upon the minutest circumstances of detail, and remotest traces of intention." Ruskin, *Works*, 16:363–64. Anticipated in his emphasis on Hunt's "truer principle of the pathetic," Ruskin's famous chapter "Of the Pathetic Fallacy" in *Modern Painters Volume III* (1856) would also return to the notion of distressed states of spectatorship, although in a more censorious tone: "The temperament which admits the pathetic fallacy, is … that of a mind and body in some sort too weak to deal fully with what is before them or upon them; borne away, or over-clouded, or over-dazzled by emotion …" Ruskin, *Works*, 5:208.

11. In this regard, it is perhaps significant that the painting was renamed *The Awakened Conscience* in 1856.

12. In the painting itself, these questions are exacerbated by the workings of the mirror on the back wall of the room. Amidst the profusion of objects it reflects, including another mirror that reflects yet more objects elsewhere in the room, we see an open French window giving onto a lush garden scene. It is out that window that the woman must direct her gaze, even while she also appears dissociated from the scene. Does our vision thus encompass what she sees? Only in part, for what we can discern is still incomplete, cut off by the mirror's edge. And moreover, we cannot securely take in the scene from her point of view, either spatially or psychically. The mirror invites forms of identification which it also denies. For an account of the mirror that stresses its oversaturation with information as well as its encouragement of identification, see Arscott, "Employer, Husband, Spectator," 179, 185–86. For Armstrong's own account of the painting's perspectival "mirror trauma," see Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 105. Armstrong draws on the discussion of mirroring in Michael Hancher, "Hunt's Awakening Conscience," *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 4 (Fall 1995): 27–39.

13. Arscott, "Employer, Husband, Spectator," 182–85. Karen Burns, meanwhile, connects the breakdown of subject-object distinctions performed by the painting to the evangelical intensities of religious conversion. Karen Burns, "The Awakening Conscience: Christian Sentiment, Salvation, and Spectatorship in Mid-Victorian Britain," *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 23 (2016), https://19.bbk.ac.uk/article/id/1706/.

14. Holman Hunt quoted the whole of Ruskin's letter in his autobiography, as if to authorize the critic's views. Intriguingly, he introduces a paragraph break at just this point, which has the effect of emphasizing the shift of perspective I have been drawing attention to in these sentences. Was this a typographical error? Or had the artist intuited something of the

importance of the shift of perspective performed in Ruskin's text? See William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1905), 1:419.

15. In taking her own distance from the "attitude of pity" and "secure narrative" of the fallen woman she finds in Ruskin's letter, Arscott suggestively emphasizes the ideological incoherence of the picture: "it seems conceivable that the path Ruskin lays out for the woman in the picture might not be the one she will follow." Arscott, "Employer, Husband, Spectator," 187.

16. Letter of May 13, 1869, quoted in Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Later Years* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 165. It was Burne-Jones's prior enthusiasm that led Ruskin to Carpaccio.

17. The title was added in an edition of 1883: see E. T. Cook, "Introduction," in Ruskin, *Works*, 27:xcvi.

18. John D. Rosenberg speaks of the "latent obscenity of the cry shouted from between the boy's leg," citing Dante's deployment of the gesture of "giving the fig" as a "supremely shocking instance of blasphemy" in Canto XXV of the *Inferno*. John D. Rosenberg, "Ruskin's Benediction: A Reading of *Fors Clavigera*," in *New Approaches to Ruskin: Thirteen Essays*, ed. Robert Hewison (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 129, 139n9. To this one might add the English expression "I don't give a fig," or recall Jesus cursing the fig tree in the gospels. In some ways it is the "latency" of cursing's presence here—its remoteness from the surface texture of events—that matters most here.

19. This practice of reading figures of the Old Testament as foreshadowing the New was an important feature of Ruskin's evangelical upbringing, and variously found its way into his mature habits of interpretation. Several scholars have suggested its significance, beginning with George P. Landow, "Ruskin and Allegory," in *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 321–458, esp. 329–56. On typological structures in *Fors Clavigera*, see Jeffrey L. Spear, "'*These* are the furies of Phlegethon': Ruskin's Set of Mind and the Creation of *Fors Clavigera*," in *The Ruskin Polygon: Essays on the Imagination of John Ruskin*, ed. John Dixon Hunt and Faith M. Holland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), 137–58. Helpful as these accounts are, they also risk treating typological reading as a stabilizing practice in Ruskin's work, domesticating what are in fact some of the critic's most radically destabilizing rhetorical strategies.

20. Fellows, *Failing Distance*, 107.

21. Hilton, *Later Years*, 241. In this, he follows John D. Rosenberg's moving but finally overstated sense of Ruskin's maintaining control: "The verses from James that opened the letter—'out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing'—here come to life as two antiphonal voices issuing simultaneously out of Ruskin's own mouth. With absolute spontaneity yet absolute mastery, he achieves a poetry of controlled cacophony." Rosenberg, "Ruskin's Benediction," 132.

22. Jennifer Scappettone, *Killing the Moonlight: Modernism in Venice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 81.

23. For more on Ruskin's troubled identifications, see Jeremy Melius, "Ruskin's Copies," *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (Autumn 2015): passim, esp. 94. As Sheila Emerson puts it in her account of Ruskin's figuration of his own childhood, "Ruskin's history of his authority not only puts females in their place, but puts him in it too." Sheila Emerson, *Ruskin: The Genesis of Invention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 207.

24. The fact that they are *merely* doubled perhaps represents another form of psychic armoring: "Doubling, we can say … in the language of psychoanalysis, is a defence against proliferation," Adam Phillips, *On Wanting to Change* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2021), 44. Ruskin had already described the journey in a private letter to Charles Eliot Norton written from Verona on August 9, 1869, in *The Correspondence of John Ruskin and Charles Eliot Norton*, ed. John Lewis Bradley and Ian Ousby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 149.

25. The possibility of taking in such delights offers an unusually sunny picture of a mode of travel Ruskin often professed to hate. For an overview of his attitudes, see Jeffrey Richards, "The Role of the Railways," in *Ruskin and Environment: The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Michael Wheeler (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 123–43.

26. Curiously, Ruskin would offer another fantasmatic rearrangement of the episode in Letter 69 of *Fors* (September 1876): "I was obliged to get into a carriage with two cadaverous sexagenarian spinsters, who had been keeping the windows up, all but a chink, for fear a drop of rain or breath of south wind should come in, and were breathing the richest compound of products of their own indigestion." The spinsters even get out "two bags of blue grapes," throwing out the "rolled-up pips and skins," Ruskin, *Works*, 28:693.

27. As Ruskin put it in an earlier passage of *Fors* 20: "What do you think was the meaning of that saying of Christ's, 'Blessed are the eyes which see the things that ye see' [Luke 10:23]? For to be made evermore incapable of seeing such things, must be the condemnation of the eyes. It is not merely the capacity of seeing sunshine, which is their blessing; but of seeing

certain things under the sunshine; nay, perhaps, even without sunshine, the eye itself becoming a Sun. Therefore, on the other hand, the curse upon the eyes will not be mere blindness to the daylight, but blindness to particular things under the daylight; so that, when directed towards these, the eye itself becomes as the Night." Ruskin, *Works*, 27:341.

28. My calling Ruskin's voice "middle" here risks invoking a prodigious theoretical literature—by Antoine Meillet, Émile Benveniste, Roland Barthes, and Derrida, among others—on the grammatical middle voice in Indo-European linguistics. I do not use the word in this technical sense. Nonetheless, Benveniste's discussion of the ancient opposition between active and middle (as opposed to passive) voices, hinging on placement of an actor either outside of an action and therefore untouched by it ("external diathesis"), or else inside an action and thus inescapably involved with it ("internal diathesis"), seems relevant to Ruskin's predicament: see Émile Benveniste, "Active and Middle Voice in the Verb," in *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meeks (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), 145–51. For an intrguing discussion of art writing's relation to a robustly deconstructive "middle voice," see Gavin Parkinson, "(Blind Summit) Art Writing, Narrative, Middle Voice," *Art History* 34, no. 2 (April 2011): 268–87.

29. Ruskin's rhetorical expansiveness here hardly does justice to the unnerving intensity of his watercolor either. For discussion of Ruskin's copies after Carpaccio's painting, see Melius, "Ruskin's Copies," 88–96. The dynamic of their production forms a story parallel to but distinct from the modes of textual revision I trace here.

30. Ruskin had met Rose La Touche in 1858—she was ten, he was thirty-nine—and proposed marriage when she turned eighteen. Her refusal of that proposal, her repeated bouts of illness, and her untimely death at twenty-seven would haunt him the rest of his life. Biographers have stressed the fact that on July 5, 1872, the morning he set to work on his description of Carpaccio's painting, Ruskin received a telegram informing him that La Touche wished him to return to England: see *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, ed. Joan Evans and John Howard Whitehouse (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956–59), 2:727; Wolfgang Kemp, *The Desire of My Eyes: The Life and Work of John Ruskin*, trans. Jan van Heurck (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 383; Hilton, *Later Years*, 240–42.

31. In the notorious sequence of letters known as the "Christmas Story"—a prurient touchstone of Ruskin studies—Ruskin recounts to his cousin Joan Severn the all-but-unmediated communications he received from St. Ursula/Rose in the days surrounding Christmas 1876: John Ruskin, *Christmas Story: John Ruskin's Venetian Letters of 1876–1877*, ed. Van Akin Burd (Newark, DE; London and Toronto: University of Delaware Press; Associated University Press, 1990). For recent discussions, see Robert Hewison, *Ruskin on Venice* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 337–43; Melius, "Ruskin's Copies," 93–94.

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Jeremy Melius

Jeremy Melius is a historian of modern art and art writing. He has recently completed a book on the invention of Botticelli and is at work on another concerning the fraught relation between John Ruskin and art history.

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