

GEORGE P. LANDOW

Reading Pre-Raphaelite Painting

I would like to consider how to read a Pre-Raphaelite painting by looking yet again at Ruskin's reading of the Tintoretto Scuola di San Rocco *Annunciation* (Plate 1). This passage in the second volume of *Modern Painters* bears importantly upon our enterprise in several ways. First of all, it provides an example of how a particularly skillful interpreter of art went about interpreting a particular picture, or, to be more precise, how he *said* he went about interpreting that picture. Furthermore, as I have argued elsewhere, Ruskin's typological reading of this *Annunciation*, which he included in the second volume of *Modern Painters* as an instance of what he terms the Penetrative Imagination, is a crux of early Pre-Raphaelitism on several counts.

Ruskin begins his reading with the spectator's experience of the painting's realism. Although the Pre-Raphaelites often wrote as if thus taking the realistic or material senses of a painting were some automatic given, in fact reading the painting as a scene composed of real objects necessarily involves acts of interpretation. Like most of those who accept realism—or in painterly terms, naturalism—as a style, Ruskin here treats it as a given and therefore he implicitly treats the style as transparent. Ruskin himself makes quite clear in an earlier volume that such naturalistic treatment entails languages of proportionate relationship, or what Gombrich has taught us to call schemata, but here he simply treats the surface reality as there, as given, and thus, despite the theoretical sophistication Ruskin displays in both his earlier volume and those that succeed this one, he treats the painting as if it were an ex-

isting scene.¹ Looking at the Scuola di San Rocco *Annunciation*, Ruskin begins his guided tour through it by pointing out that one first notices the Virgin sitting "houseless, under the shelter of a palace vestibule ruined and abandoned," surrounded by desolation.² The next step Ruskin takes in leading us through this painting makes clear that he conducts such an act of interpretation as a form of narrative, for he emphasizes not simply what one sees but how one goes about seeing it. He tells us, therefore, that the spectator "turns away at first, revolted, from the central object of the picture forced painfully and coarsely forward, a mass of shattered brickwork, with the plaster mildewed away from it" (4:264). This method of presentation, we realize, places equal weight upon the perceiver and the perceived object, the ideal spectator and what that spectator sees. Then, after describing the painting's genre details and a spectator's first reaction to them, Ruskin next points out that these visual facts might strike a spectator as merely a record of the kind of scene the artist "could but too easily obtain among the ruins of his own Venice, chosen to give a coarse explanation of the calling and the condition of the husband of Mary" (4:264). Ruskin begins his presentation of this painting by dramatizing the paths the spectator's eye takes as it comprehends first major and then minor visual details. But because he believes that visible form inextricably relates to meaning, he then immediately presents us with an imagined spectator's first conclusions about the meaning of these details: they appear, it seems, to reflect both the painter's contemporary surroundings in a ruined Venice and his modern