

RUSKIN AND "THE PLACE OF DRAGONS"

I

St. George stands traditionally for those values of self-sacrifice to which Ruskin was drawn increasingly over his career. This interest appears as early as The Seven Lamps of Architecture in the chapter entitled "The Lamp of Sacrifice."¹ In the last volume of Modern Painters, Ruskin refers to the "Hebrew system of sacrificial religion to which we may trace most of the received ideas concerning sanctity, consecration, and purification" (7. 146).² Longing for the days when men took not for themselves but gave to the gods, the early Ruskin asks his readers to recover the sacrificial spirit which had built the medieval cathedrals. By the 1860s Ruskin carries this ideal of self-sacrifice even further, now conceiving of true Christian citizens as soldiers and the willingness to sacrifice oneself as the measure of true Christianity. In Unto this Last, he wrote that "the soldier's trade, verily and essentially, is not slaying, but being slain" (17. 36-37). This formula anticipates the quasi-military structure of St. George's Guild, which Ruskin founded and headed, whose members were to be both "soldiers of the ploughshare and of the sword" (17. 75). It also calls to mind St. George himself, who was not only a soldier but a martyr. As Ruskin notes in Fors, St. George "was invested with the glorious Crowne of Martyrdom upon the 23. day of April, Anno Domini nostri, 290." For Ruskin, as we shall see, St. George was not merely "Standard Bearer" but "the great Martyr" (27. 481).

The thrust of the argument which follows is that Ruskin laid personal claim to Carpaccio's St. George's Fight with the Dragon not only because he saw in it a comprehensive ideogram of his values and mythology, a visual translation and confirmation of his favorite themes, but because the painting presented a vivid graph of his inner life, his unconscious impulses and fears. As a target for Ruskin's projections, St. George's Fight reflects his unresolved and destructive conflicts, the struggle between repression and instinct, and the method he perhaps unconsciously adopted to sublimate these.

One of Ruskin's sources for the legend of St. George was the Golden Legend of Jacopo da Voragine, but the subject matter of Carpaccio's painting derives from the Dalmatian legend of St. George in which St. George in his travels to Libya came to a city plagued by a monstrous dragon. After trying to placate the monster first with sheep and then with children, the inhabitants finally chose by lot the King's daughter, Cleodolind (Carpaccio's Sabra), as the Dragon's next and hopefully last victim. When St. George arrived on the scene he found Cleodolind walking to her death; she is visible in the right hand side of the painting with her hands folded in an attitude of prayer. Like