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Weeping Over Bluish Leaves

We passed still farther onward, where the ice
Another people ruggedly enswathes,
Not downward turned, but all of them reversed.
Weeping itself there does not let them weep,
And grief that finds a barrier in the eyes
Turns itself inward to increase the anguish
Because the earliest tears a cluster form,
And, in the manner of a crystal visor,
Fill all the cup beneath the eyebrow full.

— Dante, *Inferno*

THE CENTER OF COOLNESS, the most elegant place in Manhattan, is the Frick Collection on East 70th Street. In comparison with the brownstones down the block, the Frick looks embalmed, as if it were a royal crypt transported from some French cemetery. When you're inside, the city is hushed and voices are damped to a soft rustle. The Frick has lovely air. To me it has always smelled as if it were scented with the finest particles of disintegrated books, purified by centuries of quiet breathing. I loved the embalmer's smell when I was young, without thinking much about it, and I love it even more now that the place reminds me of a tomb.

The Frick Collection never changes: it always has the same paintings, in the same places. Years ago, when I was a teenager, I used to walk around to see the Vermeers (one in a hallway close by the entrance, and another in a back room), but that was just a way of circling my favorite painting, the only picture that could draw me all the way from my parents' house in upstate New York down into the city: Giovanni Bellini's *Ecstasy of St. Francis* (colorplate 3). Probably from the time my father first took me to see the Frick as a young child, I was mesmerized by Bellini's bluish leaves and waxy stones. My father once told me that when he was younger, he'd gone specially to see the *Ecstasy of St. Francis*, but he didn't say exactly why. I wondered about that, and eventually the painting got its grip on me as well.

Of any picture, this is the one that has brought me closest to tears. I may never have actually wept in front of it—it's been a long time, almost thirty years—but I remember standing there, choked up, with a rush of half-formed thoughts swimming in my head. When I was thirteen or fourteen, the *Ecstasy of St. Francis* was almost too much to look at: I recall thinking I could only take in a few details on each visit. It wasn't a painting, really: it was a dream of what a painting might be. By comparison other pictures were clumsy illustrations where things were, as Beckett put it, ill-seen and ill-said. Somehow, the *Ecstasy of St. Francis* resembled the way I thought. It had the right texture, it pooled in the right places. When I looked, it was as if words had been swept out of my head and replaced by brushstrokes and colors. The word "magical" doesn't do justice to what I felt, but then again I can hardly remember what I felt: I was attached to the painting in a strange fashion that I have nearly lost the ability to recall.

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Why memories should fade. If the *Ecstasy of St. Francis* were hung in some faraway place, I might only have seen it once. My memories of it would have faded, in the natural fashion of things that pass and are forgotten. But it is in the Frick, just where it has always been. Each time I go back, there it is: the same size, the same colors, the same cracks. It seems almost cruel of the Frick not to put it away, and let it dim into some poorly remembered shadow of my childhood, settled in comfortably among the other things I have outgrown. Then, maybe, I could visit it in my imagination and remember again the pure amazement of those first trips to East 70th Street.

In the past, paintings did fade into memory, and people had to cherish their memories or risk forgetting the pictures altogether. Before the invention of airplanes and cars, paintings were substantially harder to see, and before the rise of modern public museums, the majority of paintings were effectively off limits to most people. We tend not to notice such slow changes in our cultural habits, but they have a far-reaching effect on the ability pictures have to move us. In pre-revolutionary China, before there were museums in the Western sense, paintings were largely in the hands of the court or of aristocrats. Aspiring painters sometimes made long and risky voyages with the hope of persuading owners to show their jealously guarded masterpieces. Some paintings became the objects of almost religious veneration. They were copied, of course, but no one could entirely trust a copy. A painter might only see a rare painting once, for a few minutes, and then it would have to be held in memory for years, and perhaps for an entire lifetime. Painters who wanted to learn the style of some ancient master would be lucky to see two or three of the master's paintings in a lifetime of traveling.

Today everything has changed. We can fly quickly from city to city comparing pictures, or wait for large traveling exhibitions to bring together all of Pollock, or Cézanne, or Picasso. These days reproductions are good enough to serve as passable stand-ins for the originals. If you're on vacation and you see a picture you like, you no longer have to store it up in memory against the near-certainty that you'll never see it again. At the very least, you can buy a book or a postcard to remind you of the original, and keep your memory fresh.

Most of us are happy with the new arrangements: within limits, we can see what we want when we want. Yet I wonder if the Chinese customs might not be better than

ours. If I had known I would only see Bellini's painting once, I would have looked hard, and tried to memorize it. I might even have made a sketch of it, and labeled all the colors. Later I could have tried to nourish my memory by reading over my notes and trying to call it to mind.

Memories are lovely things because they are unstable. Each time you recall something it changes a little, like a whispered secret that goes around a room and gradually changes into nonsense. If I hadn't seen the *Ecstasy of St. Francis* again, my memories of it would have slowly altered to fit the changing shape of my life. Who knows?—the painting might have crystallized into an emblem of my childhood. Probably it would have blurred together with memories of other paintings. These days it is hard to let any memory grow old naturally, because it is so easy to get good quality photographs of paintings. Looking at a photograph refreshes your memory, artificially sustaining it when it might be best to let it recede with time and be gradually lost.

Aren't memories supposed to be things that get dimmer with time? As you grow and get older, most things in life change along with you. My childhood possessions, the ones from the years when I visited the Frick, are long gone. The few that remain are old, broken, and unusable. The people I know are growing older along with me, adding wrinkles imperceptibly year by year. Music and novels aren't like paintings: they age the same way as a person does. I remember tremendous performances of music that can never be recaptured. Each year I remember them a little more poorly, and that is as it should be. I may never find the time to re-read *Crime and Punishment* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and so my thoughts about them keep changing, getting less accurate, shaping and reshaping themselves each time I recall them. The memories and half-

memories of books and music are part of what I am, and I am not sure it makes sense to doggedly re-read and re-experience things I encountered long ago.

With pictures, though, that is exactly what happens. A picture can be taken in so quickly, and reproductions of it can be so accurate, that it can be impossible *not* to see it again and again over the years. After a while, the effect is numbing. I have seen the original *Ecstasy of St. Francis* many times, and I've also seen it projected in classrooms, in books, and even on postcards. With more popular paintings, the situation is even worse. Paintings like Munch's *The Scream* and Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* have been effectively ruined for me. Not only have I forgotten my first encounters with them, which were sometimes intense, but I have almost forgotten that they mean *anything*.

A few years ago I was out walking in the neighborhood of my old elementary school, and I suddenly remembered the amazing twenty-foot-high swingset and the daunting jungle gym with its web of crisscrossing bars. They were very clear in my mind. I even remembered one time I had tried to swing so high I would go completely over the bar. (The swing went up too far, the chains went slack, and I nearly fell off.) Thinking of those things, I walked into the schoolyard, hoping to revisit the place and replenish my memories. The jungle gym turned out to be simple construction of welded pipes, and the swingset was just over head height. I was disillusioned, but even more than that, I realized the sad little jungle gym had erased my memory of its grand imaginary cousin. Looking at the shiny pipes, worn smooth by generations of hands—including my own—I lost the picture I'd had in memory. The everyday object vanquished its magnificent rival, and I did not think about the playground again until I came to write these lines. It doesn't always pay to study and restudy a thing, because memories are not like building-blocks

or filing cards that just pile up. A wonderful, magical first encounter can be wholly erased by a thoughtless perfunctory visit.

Each visit I make to the Frick snaps the *Ecstasy of St. Francis* back into focus, correcting the errors of my memory, hauling the picture back in front of me. The painting is like a figure in a feverish dream that seems always to recede and yet remains fixed in place. I can see it, and yet I can't—it's as if my eyes won't stay focused. Some people look forward to returning to a painting they had seen years before. When they see it, they are reassured that some things in life don't change, that the painting will always be there. But for me each visit is an uncomfortable experience, because the picture chafes against my memories. Why not prefer the memory to the real thing?

I imagine what would happen if I kept a diary of my memories of the painting. I would take it with me each time I go to see the painting. Once there, I would note where the diary went wrong, and erase whatever doesn't match the facts. After a number of years, the diary would be blank. Nothing in my memory would be right: the painting and my thoughts about it would go their separate ways.

I don't keep such a diary, and it's probably just as well. When I saw the painting again last winter, after an absence of more than five years, it seemed very far away. It looked inaccessible, a shining blue beetle caught in an amber stone.

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Oozy rocks and odd colors. Physically, nothing has budged in the thirty-odd years since I first set eyes on *The Ecstasy of St. Francis*. The painting is still centered on its wall, flanked by its perpetual companions, two portrait paintings. On the left is Titian's

picture of a pale young man in a black-speckled ermine coat. He wears a rakish red felt cap that looks as if it had been sewn together from cutting-floor scraps. He seems poetic but vague, and he fingers a shabby glove. On the right is Titian's portrait of his friend Pietro Aretino, a yellow journalist and man-about-town, known as a womanizer and part-time pornographer. It is a flat picture, dully painted, and Pietro has an obtuse expression as if he has just been hit in the face by a frying pan.

Below *The Ecstasy of St. Francis* are two green chairs bordered in green tassels, like the prize antiques in a funeral parlor. A dusty rope hangs in an exhausted curve between them. A huge lamp is cantilevered out over the painting. The bulbs are hidden by a curved metal shade covered in peeling bronze paint. Since there are eight brilliant reflections along the top edge of the painting, alternating incandescent white and cobalt blue, the lamp must house a row of bulbs, four blue and four white. (On my last visit, one of the white bulbs had burned out, leaving a gap between the glares, and imperceptibly tipping the balance of color toward blue.)

The painting itself shows Saint Francis, dressed in his monk's robes, looking up into the sky. He is barefoot (his sandals and walking stick are back at his little desk), and he is surrounded by a swirling sea of bluish rocks. They're hypnotic, those rocks. Some look chalky and dry; others ooze like melting jello. Immediately above the saint's head, the cliff face divides and flows around him, as if he were a boulder in a stream. (Bellini may have been thinking of an early legend in which St. Francis escapes the devil by melting into the cliff. According to the story, the rocks parted like wax—a perfect match for the liquescent stones in the painting.) Toward the top of the painting, an arc of

yellowish rocks mimics the saint's pose; even the gatherings of fabric at his waistband are echoed in the tendrils of ivy spreading from a fissure in the rock.

The color is a mystery. Some rocks are safety-glass blue. Others are bottle blue, or the blue of cold wet grass. The blue deepens downward, toward St. Francis's feet. Above his head the cliffs are creamy; perhaps they are reflecting yellowish light from the afternoon sun. As you look down, the cream dims to a fluorescent beige, and then darkens into a deep glowing turquoise. It looks as if St. Francis were wading in a chlorinated pool, moving slowly down toward the deep end.

Strangely, there is no green between the yellow and the blue. As any painter knows, that's a trick, since even a dab of blue paint will turn yellow into a bright leafy green. Somehow Bellini avoids that trap, and his candent yellows settle into somnolent blues, without even a hint of green. Some of the blues are stained by browns—there are scatters of fine dirt, and a fuzz of blighted grass—but nothing around the saint is normal, healthy plant green. Just under his right hand is the torn stump of a fig tree. Normally the inner wood and sap would be a tender sap green, but here the ripped surface reflects a wan yellowish light. Even the juniper and orris root in the saint's garden have an odd blackish color.

In the distance things have more ordinary hues. A slate gray donkey stands in a close-cropped field. The grass under its feet is parched and marred by thistles, but overall the field has the common color of grass. Farther off, a shepherd herds a dozen sheep across a field of tender yellow vegetation. The distant hill is carpeted in dark viridian trees shaped like cotton balls. (The trees have an unfortunate resemblance to the tassels

on the chairs in front of the painting. Bellini's green is wonderful and resonant, and the chairs are ersatz. That bothered me even as a teenager.)

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How to paint a miracle. Clearly something mysterious is happening. In the distance it is early summer, with an Italian azure sky and a late afternoon sun. The air is clear and sunny. But the foreground is plunged in a mystical night. The sun seems to be shining on the saint, because it casts strong shadows behind him, and weaker shadows trail from his trellis, his walking stick, and the footrest of his table. Yet just a few feet farther on there are no shadows. The saplings and briars bask in a shadowless haze. The donkey casts almost no shadow, and a big tree behind it is entirely shadowless.

Is the saint looking up at the sun? Possibly; his robe is warmed by an ochre light, and he even has a tiny yellow glint in his eye. A bluish light lingers around his hermit's retreat like a toxic fog. Why doesn't the sunlight penetrate it? And what exactly is St. Francis looking at? His eyes are fixed somewhere up above the upper-left-hand corner of the painting. In the corner itself, the clouds suddenly become sharp-edged and yellowish, and a laurel tree bends in a strange way, as if someone has jumped into it.

When I was young, I thought there must be a true miracle somewhere to the left of those clouds, out beyond the picture frame. I thought the saint is experiencing something so tremendous that Bellini knew that he couldn't paint it. Looking at the picture was like looking at an eclipse by watching its image cast on a sidewalk. I saw the bluish rocks, the saint's astonished and serious face, and the uncanny light, but I wasn't allowed to see what he sees.

Then, some time when I was in my teens, I read the stories about St. Francis's stigmatization. According to one version, he had been meditating late at night, when a blinding light fell over the landscape. He turned toward the light, and was pierced by the stigmata—five wounds in imitation of Christ's punctured hands and feet and his cut side. Since the painting is called *The Ecstasy of St. Francis*, I looked for the wounds, and found two small ones on the saint's hands.

The painting is meant to show the moment of the stigmatization, but it does so with extraordinary subtlety. It is only nighttime in the front of the picture. (Some historians prefer to say that the entire picture is meant to be a night scene, despite what their eyes show them.) Heaven doesn't open up and spill out angels, and there are no streams of blood from St. Francis's wounds. I imagine most visitors to the Frick see it as a picture of a saint in a landscape, praying. You'd think that if the revelation had taken place at night, and a brilliant yellow light had shone on the saint, everyone in that distant village would have come running. It *is* a revelation, but it is exceedingly subtle, and only a few creatures take note of it. The donkey's ears are pricked back and its mouth is slightly open as if it were dully aware something is happening. Just under St. Francis's right hand, a rabbit peeks out of its burrow: it is alert, but wall-eyed, and its stare doesn't reveal what it sees. At the far lower left, in a dark ravine, a small russet-throated bird looks skyward. It might be craning its neck to catch the water that drips from a stone spout, or it may be trying to see the miracle overhead. In the far distance, the shepherd turns and looks our way. And most subtle of all: toward the rear of the flock one ram is painted very carefully, and it stares right at St. Francis.

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Assisi and Ithaca. When I first saw how this worked, I was won over. Bellini must have been uncomfortable with the idea of a heaven populated by people in robes, and he kept the saint's supernatural bleeding to a minimum. He was uneasy, too, with the idea that the night sky could have been lit up by a miraculous searchlight. The painting shows how a miracle might look with the volume turned way down. It takes place in an almost ordinary mid-afternoon, and produces only a few spots of blood. There is no angel and no costume melodrama. Instead, the landscape is the miracle. Because nothing is quite what it should be, everything is partly sacred. The rocks and trees are nearly supernatural, so that the sky and the saint can be practically normal.

As I remember it, I was satisfied to have the answer in hand, so I knew what the painting is really about. Because I am not a Christian, and since I had no thought of studying art history, I wasn't particularly interested in that end of things—I didn't really care about the doctrine of the stigmatization, or the idea of a miracle. What I loved was the diffusion of sacredness, the rapt attention Bellini had paid to every detail.

The house in Ithaca, New York, where I grew up, fronts woods and fields. I was used to looking at plants, and I recognized many of the plants and rocks in Bellini's painting. Our eaves were heavy with grape vines like the ones in the painting, and the woods behind our house had ivy, maidenhair fern, and briars very like the ones Bellini painted. I knew the feel of chalky limestone cliffs, and dark wet clefts in the rock where water drips all year around. I had climbed over rocks like the ones in the painting, and gotten scraped by dead branches that grew straight out from the vertical rockface. I had wedged my feet into holes like the one Bellini painted, and grabbed onto saplings like the

ones he planted at the top of the cliff. Even the saint's retreat looked familiar, because I had explored limestone caves. The damp cave opening, the natural lintel stone above it, and the scrub slope on top were things I knew from boyhood adventures. Bellini had some Italian things in the picture too: we didn't have fig trees, laurels, or medieval castles in upstate New York; but we had donkeys, herons, rabbits, sheep, and places to run and hide like the one St. Francis found.

As a boy, I was entranced by rough slopes, clefts, caves, and thickets because they were overlooked details of landscapes. People wouldn't ordinarily stop to admire them. I loved tracts of dense brush no one could penetrate, slippery slopes no one would visit, knotted vines, and briars glowing red in a thicket of brown twigs. I knew that once you get beyond parks and picture postcards, nature is messy and tangled and full of ordinary things. I suppose I sensed a deep affinity with Bellini, since he had looked at the natural world long enough to realize that plants aren't symmetrical, and that rocks come in shapes beside blocks and balls. The *Ecstasy of St. Francis* showed me things I was ready to recognize: stones that are lumpy, trees that bend into strange curves, birds that crane their necks to the sky, tattered clouds. The beauty of it was that Bellini wasn't just playing or day-dreaming, as I had been doing: he was finding evidence of a miracle. If I came across a bluish rock, I might have said it was blue because there was copper in it. Bellini's rocks are blue because they are reflecting a revelation. The little plants at the saint's feet, clinging to slight depressions in the rock, are more than just scraps that nature has thrown down: they are witnesses, bathed in a holy light. The *Ecstasy of St. Francis* is an entire world where every twig and thorn has its measure of holiness. A contemporary

of Bellini's said he loved to "wander in his paintings." Certainly that was true for me: I loved every last, lost detail in the painting, and the more lost the better.

I looked especially long at the plants that sprout along the bottom margin of the painting. (They were easier to see because they were at my eye level.) In front of the saint's feet, for instance, there are four stray plants. Most artists would have painted a corsage of four stems, with leaves all around in a pretty circle. Bellini would never be happy with such a cliché. The left-hand seedling has a straight stem, with one tiny leaf down low, and a crown of leaflets at the top. It isn't possible to tell how many, because he has let them rest on one another in a tangle. The third sapling is a masterpiece: it wavers slightly on its way up, and then splits into two twigs. Three tiny bluish leaves nestle in the fork. Both forks are barren. One shoots out to the side, and the other sprouts an oscillating tendril, and ends in an upward flourish. The wavering stem is an echo of the wavering laurel tree, on a scale so small it would never be noticed. (It is as if the little twig experiences another, smaller miracle of its own.) The painting is replete with these miracles of close observation: each leaf is polished to a dark shine, each stone is enameled. At the far upper right, three tiny tendrils hang down. The longest one, so thin it looks more like a blond hair, has four delicately lobed leaves hanging on bell-shaped stems; it ends in nascent seedbuds so tiny they escape into the surface of the painting.

It was the lostness of the painting that held me, its capacity to lodge my attention on some forgotten detail. Like all great paintings, it changed the way I saw real landscapes, and I started paying even more attention to the tints of rocks and the shapes of clouds. I noticed when a leaf was too tiny to notice, or when a stem deviated as if it were being pushed gently to one side. I watched the broken paths that light follows as it

finds its way through foliage to the ground. I would never have said it this way, but the painting was a kind of bible without words: it taught me how to find meaning in the smallest scrap on the forest floor, or the dullest glint from a nameless stone.

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The poison well of art history. That was then, and this is now. Now, I feel almost nothing for the picture. I can recapture part of what I once felt, but the intensity is gone, and so is my conviction. Once I was transfixed by a world where every ordinary object glinted in a half-sacred light. Now I can't quite see that: I have tried to remember what I looked at, and I have gone back and looked again, but it's not a transcendental painting any more. I can still see that Bellini labored over plants and stones, and sometimes I can almost picture the young man who spent so long in front of the painting almost thirty years ago. But the miracles have drained out of the painting. It's a beautiful picture—but as I write that word, I know how it would have rankled me thirty years ago. I might have said “beautiful” is a pale word, better suited for a museum than a miracle.

I put the blame for this squarely at the feet of art history. Over the years I read more about Bellini, and about the painting, and my attraction to it was one of the reasons I eventually went on to study Renaissance art. Yet each time I learned something new, I lost a little of what I had felt before.

The main disillusionment came with a short book by the art historian Millard Meiss, called *Giovanni Bellini's St. Francis in the Frick Collection*. Meiss sets out to stop people like me, who only want to see rocks and birds. He wants to restore the picture's original historical purpose. He is at pains to demonstrate that the painting is a proper

representation of the stigmatization, and that the saint is looking directly at, and receiving his wounds from, the cloudburst at the upper-left corner of the painting. His book has a close-up photograph of the region, and you can see dozens of tiny spikes of light shooting out from a cloud, and streaming in the saint's direction. They're like long yellow needles, lances of sharpened light, and as far as Meiss is concerned they are the source of the revelation: they travel invisibly through the air, becoming impossibly fine and sharp, piercing the saint's feet, his hands, and his side. They cause the tiny droplets of blood appear on his palms, and a minute puncture on his forward foot.

Meiss is right, I'm sure. He lines up other paintings as witnesses, demonstrating that Bellini had toyed with the idea of painting an *Ecstasy of St. Francis* without the usual seraph in the sky. A few years earlier, Bellini had painted another *Ecstasy of St. Francis* with a tiny angel and cross hidden up in a corner where it would hardly be noticed. In another painting he had hung a translucent angel in a twilit sky like a Japanese paper lantern. It is clear Bellini wanted to do away with the clumsy machinery that earlier painters used, where the angel floats in the sky as big as life, and lines connect his hands and feet to St. Francis's hands and feet. Even Giotto had followed that obvious machinery: he had taken out his straightedge and drawn lines, tying angel to saint in connect-the-dots fashion. A viewer who has never thought about it before can figure out how the stigmata works by tracing Giotto's lines: the one from the angel's right hand goes to the saint's right hand, and so forth. Bellini wanted his viewers to concentrate on the saint's ecstasy, and not on the technology of miracles, so he evaporated the flying angel and nearly erased the lines. Meiss says, in effect, This is a proper early Renaissance

religious painting, and it's not right to evade that by imagining Bellini was saying that nature itself is sacred.

At first I tried to wriggle out of Meiss's solution. I noticed that the shadows at the saint's feet don't come from the yellow clouds, but rather from somewhere off to our left. The saint doesn't look at the clouds, but at a higher spot. And the town in the distance is definitely not a night scene, as it should be if Bellini were literal about his sources.

Art historians have answers for these objections, of course. They say Bellini was just mastering perspective, and so it's to be expected that the shadows are a bit off. Neither should we expect him to pay too much attention to the exact direction of the saint's glance, because he was concentrating on the saint's state of mind. Even the unusually bright night could be explained by inexperience. Bellini made this painting toward the end of the fifteenth century, when few artists had attempted to paint night scenes. Perhaps the town in the painting is Bellini's idea of a natural-looking nocturnal landscape—as Meiss says, no one is abroad except the shepherd, and it certainly looks still and quiet. Hollywood directors have done worse trying to convince us that scenes were filmed at night.

I read Meiss's book sometime when I was still a teenager, and I went back to the painting full of enthusiasm, to see if I could agree that the painting works the way he says it does. As I looked, Meiss's examples came to mind—Bellini's earlier paintings, paintings of St. Francis by other painters—and I compared them with what I saw. I measured the shadows with my eyes, to see if they might plausibly point up toward that corner. I tried to see the painting as Bellini might have, rather than worrying about the exact colors of day and night. I decided I agreed with Meiss, and I still do. (Though

sometimes I also suspect that Bellini painted a small angel *above* the top margin of the picture. That was St. Francis would have been looking directly at it. Unfortunately it's impossible to tell, because the panel has been sawed off at the top and an unknown amount is missing.)

It was fun playing Meiss's game, but it had a side effect that I only began to notice some years later. It blunted my interest in the landscape, and it unfocused my earlier enthusiasm. Meiss says that the painting is more than a landscape because it reflects the saint's ecstasy, and he wants his readers to remember that Bellini wasn't practicing botanical or zoological illustration. Meiss says that, but what he actually does is ignore the landscape in order to spend time looking at *other* paintings of angels and saints. He values the painting enough to write a short book about it, but his way of showing his admiration is to investigate the painting's place in history.

Historical knowledge damps our youthful enthusiasms, and if historians and teachers aren't worried about that, it's because they think historical facts correct youthful enthusiasms. But they don't. What I learned from Meiss and others took my own experience away from me and substituted a different kind of understanding. The one didn't correct the other, it swamped it. My historical knowledge dulled my encounter with the image, deflected my attention onto other things (evidence, angels, texts, miscellaneous facts), and finally extinguished the emotion that I had once felt. History wasn't just correcting my illusions, as we fondly suppose. It was alienating me from my own interest.

Once, the *Ecstasy of St. Francis* was visionary: now, it is about a vision. Once, it held me in thrall: now, it is a picture of someone else held in thrall. There are plenty of

things to be said in favor of studying the history of an object you love; historical knowledge can temper personal feelings, and lend them the balance of considered judgments. The painting depicts a landscape near La Verna in Italy, not Ithaca in upstate New York, and it was made by a person who may never have thought of scaling a cliff or crawling into a cave. It was created at a specific point in the Renaissance, and it owes as much to other paintings as it does to anything Bellini may have actually observed.

History can be a good corrective, and I am an art historian because I find history both valuable and pleasing. Some of what I learned did enrich my experience and showed me new meanings. But in its cumulative effect, historical understanding undermines passion. It smothers strong emotion and puts calm understanding in its place. It puts words to experiences that are powerful because they are *felt* rather than thought, and in doing so it kills them. Learning about this painting's history slowly tore down my original responses and dismantled my memories.

At one time the painting was very personal for me. It meant a great deal, even if I couldn't quite say what. Now I can say exactly what, but I am barred from ever feeling it again.

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History is insidious, because once it starts to corrode your sense of a picture, there is no stopping it. Meiss started the process, and then in graduate school I read much more. Each text took something I had felt and transformed it into something I knew. Eventually I read enough to realize that even my love of lonely woods was not mine at all. I had inherited it from nineteenth-century Romantic writers like Ruskin. In upstate

New York in the 1960's, I had been unwittingly playing out ideas that had been developed in England and Germany in the nineteenth century. The things I loved about the woods—the thorns, the swamps, the slanting light from the winter sun—were all the stocks-in-trade of Romantic poetry and art criticism. Even the word “woods” as opposed to “forest,” or the word “cave” as opposed to “cavern,” were proof that I was the unconscious heir of late Romantic ideas—ideas that Bellini could never even have thought. I was trapped, forced to admit that my kind of nature-worship was a watered-down descendent of ideas that hadn't even existed until fully three centuries after Bellini's death. There it was in black and white at the beginning of Meiss's book: he says that people once thought that Bellini's painting was nothing but a glorious sacred landscape, and they didn't want to come to terms with the fact that it might be a specific religious event, rigorously depicted. That was my attitude in a nutshell.

From that moment on, if I thought of my childhood experiences at all, it was to interrogate them, to see if I had outgrown my nineteenth-century feelings about nature. (I haven't: I am still entranced by dark ravines, late autumn sunlight, and other romantic clichés too numerous to mention.) Having read Ruskin, I understand more about the Romanticism that was in the air when I was growing up. Having read Meiss, I can see that Bellini's painting is first and foremost a Christian revelation. But I have come perilously close to forgetting why I was drawn to the painting in the first place.

Historical knowledge stripped me of several illusions, but at a huge cost. I can lecture at length on the *Ecstasy of St. Francis*, but I have lost the ability to be moved by it. It's an insidious process: I remember I was moved, and I have recalled enough to write these pages. I can conjure the past, and testify to my obsession with the picture. I can

even remember how I stood there, overwhelmed, unable to move. My eyes might well have been swimming with tears. I can say all that, and so I can almost convince myself that I haven't lost anything. But this is an historian's false comfort: actually, I have lost a tremendous amount. History is the "pale cast of thought," as Shakespeare says. It throws a veil over the world, and after a time, our eyes get accustomed to the weakened light and we come to think that the world looks the same as it always has.

What I have described here has also happened with every other work of art that has moved me; but I regret most what I have learned about *St. Francis in Ecstasy*. The painting is there, but my wonderfully intense, nearly indescribable emotions are long gone. I wish I could turn back the clock and recapture those days when I stood in front of the painting, intoxicated by thoughts I could hardly describe. Now the world has dulled, and filled up with dusty words. Before, the leaves were magic: almost too beautiful to be seen without flinching, and colored an impossibly smooth and chilling blue.