THE SNAIL'S GAZE

The Snail's Gaze

I know where this is headed. You're going to tell me yet again that I'm going too far—that I'm having a good time, but that I'm also overinterpreting. It's true, there's nothing I like more than having a good time. As for overinterpreting, though, you're the one who's going too far. I admit I see a lot of things in this snail; but, after all, if the painter painted it the way he did, it was because he wanted us to see it and to ask ourselves what the heck it was doing there. In Mary's sumptuous palace, at the precise (and oh so holy) moment of the Annunciation, a fat snail, its eyes popping out of its head, is making its way from Gabriel to the Virgin, and you think this is normal? You find nothing out of the ordinary in this? In the foreground no less! You can almost make out the trail of slime it leaves behind. In the palace of the immaculate Virgin, so pure, so clean, this slimy thing is quite subversive, and there is nothing discreet about its presence either. Far from trying to hide it, the painter has placed this snail right in front of our eyes; we can't miss it. In the end, it's the only thing we see, the only thing we can think about, and so we ask ourselves: What the heck is it doing there? And don't go telling me that it's merely the painter's "whim." Sure, it is one of Francesco del Cossa's capriccios, and maybe it took a painter from Ferrara to come up with this bizarre figure to confirm his originality. But the capriccio doesn't explain everything; you know that as well as I do. If this snail were but the painter's whim, the patron would have refused it, erased it, covered it over. But it's there, irrevocably. And so there has to be a good reason for its existence at such a place and in such a time.

You've come up with a solution to the problem, and it's the same old iconographic one, as always. Once again, iconography comes to the rescue, calming all your fears. I, too, read that article in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, where an expert gives us a text

and an image to "explain" Cossa's snail. It's quite simple: because those good old primitive folk believed that snails were fertilized by the dew, the snail could easily represent the Virgin, whose divine insemination has been compared to, among other things, the fertilization of the earth by the rain—*Rorate coeli* . . . "Heavens, let your dew fall. . . ." This clever and wise iconographer is so sure of what she is saying that as proof of her hypothesis, she offers a Marian text with, above it, a miserable engraving that represents a few snails sprinkled with gentle raindrops from heaven. For you, the case is closed: the snail is a symbol of the Virgin at the moment of the Annunciation—and the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* offers us a lifetime guarantee of this fact. That's it. End of story.

Still, I'm not so sure. I have my doubts. If this symbol were so good, so "natural," other examples of Annunciation snails would exist. Do you iconographers out there know of any? To my knowledge, in any event, they are extremely rare. Frankly, I have seen only one other instance—and even in this case, I'm not so sure I was seeing a snail. In the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena, there is a mediocre rendering of the Annunciation by Girolamo da Cremona. In that painting, I thought I saw on the ground, level with Gabriel's lily, two or three pebbles that vaguely—very vaguely—resembled empty shells. No, snails are usually found in representations of the Resurrection or in funereal images (because they come out of their shells, like the dead on Judgment Day). There are just too few snails in Annunciation paintings for you to be able to boldly claim that the snail is a customary symbol for the Virgin at the moment of the Incarnation. Once again, you have got what you wanted: you have smoothed out all the rough spots, trivialized the anomaly that attracted your attention in the first place. Your iconography has fulfilled its mission: it has squashed the snail. It's no longer bothersome. Evidently, iconographers are the firefighters of art history: they are there to calm things down, to put out the blaze that might be lit by something strange because it might force one to take a closer look and admit that everything is not as simple, as obvious, as one would like.

Francesco del Cossa
The Annunciation,
ca. 1470–72
Gemäldegalerie Alte
Meister, Dresden

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Let's be fair. The *Journal*'s expert did come up with one possible explanation for Cossa's bizarre innovation: for him to have placed this snail in his *Annunciation*, Cossa had to be able to find a meaning for it that was acceptable in the eyes of his patrons—and in his own. But the expert did not explain what the snail was doing there, in the foreground, right under our noses. And for a good reason: this is not iconography's task. It does not have to tell us why the painter put it there; that's out of its sphere. And yet, in this painting, the question remains: What the heck is this snail doing there?

In my opinion, to answer this question you first need to know where *there* is, where, in the painting, the snail's space is. Do you see what I mean? This is the kind of question that is beyond you and that you find superfluous. Why split hairs? We can see where the snail is; why get all worked up about it? Because, precisely, by accepting the evidence (the snail is there, in the foreground, at the edge of the painting), you miss the main thing that the painter is asking you to see. If I'm telling you this it's because I also thought it was enough to say that the snail was at the edge of the painting in order to grasp Cossa's idea. I had managed to come up with an interesting—I'd even say brilliant (no need for false modesty between us)—explanation, but I abandoned it because it was too fragile, too tentative. But I'll give it to you anyway. It was quite amusing.

Piero della Francesca
The Annunciation,
polyptych of Saint
Anthony, 1470 (detail)
National Gallery
of Umbria, Perugia

I started out thinking that the meaning of the snail's placement was inseparable from the perspectival construction. I still believe this, because the work is a veritable tour de force of perspective. Its orthogonal lines converge as usual in the middle, but they come up against the majestic column in such a way that the space opens laterally in two directions: on the one hand, toward Mary's nearby room and, on the other, toward a faraway city where the palaces recede in the distance. In sum, Cossa displays a virtuosity that is fairly rare in Italy in 1469. The sophisticated brio—so typical of Ferrara—of this structure is intensified by the placement of the figures, confirming that Cossa very definitely wants to be original. In an entirely unusual way, he in effect presents Gabriel and the Virgin obliquely, in illusory depth: kneeling on the left in the foreground,

Gabriel is seen almost from behind, while Mary is in the middle distance, in the second bay of the portico, seen in three-quarter profile. Well, I don't know if you noticed it, but this placement results in something that seems paradoxical at first glance: within the architectural space where they are located, Gabriel and Mary are almost playing hide-and-seek on either side of the central column. It's not immediately apparent, of course, but it is undeniable: the great central column is located nearly on the axis that relates them to one another. Be careful! This is neither mistake nor clumsiness on Cossa's part; he knows exactly what he is doing. Nor is he the only painter to have placed a column between Gabriel and Mary. The great Piero della Francesca did the same thing in 1470 in the *Annunciation* that crowns the Perugia polyptych. You are no doubt aware of this if you've read Thomas Martone on the subject. Here, too, Gabriel has a column in front of him, and it is through this column that he sees Mary. This doesn't trouble us: God can see through mountains; an archangel can easily see through a column. Nor is it an accident that

the gaze passes through a column: the column is a well-known, almost banal, symbol of the Divinity—of both the Father and the Son—and in his *Meditations* the Pseudo-Bonaventura explains that despite how fast Gabriel had flown, the Trinity, invisible or unrecognizable, was already in Mary's room when he arrived. In iconographic terms—this should make you happy!—the column traditionally stands for the Divinity's presence at the scene of the Annunciation. What's more, Cossa in effect underscores this because Gabriel's hand, lifted toward Mary, visually touches the shaft of the column: as he blesses the Virgin, he points to the majestic and mysterious presence of the divine.

It was on this basis that I had first attempted to explain the snail's placement. Given Cossa's obvious sophistication, I wondered if by any chance the axis that linked Gabriel, his right hand, the column, and Mary obliquely in perspective depth, and from bottom to top, corresponded to another, less obvious one that, also through the column and Gabriel's hand, linked the snail to an element, situated in perspective depth and at the top of the painting, that would help explain the meaning of the gastropod. You are skeptical of this line of thinking. And you're right to be: I don't believe that painters have some "secret geometry" either. The notion of geometry exists more often in the mind of the interpreter than in that of the artist. However, in this particular instance, the composition is patently geometric, and the arrangement I was looking for, if it existed, was simple. And because my idea went along with the general spirit of the painting, there was no harm in testing it. You never know. Sure enough, to my surprise, I noticed that indeed the axis between the snail and Gabriel's hand on the column led my gaze more or less toward the small, flat figure of God the Father in the sky. And imagine my delight when I saw that, with his cloud, the Father's shape strangely resembles that of the snail and that they are nearly identical in size. The structure of the image led to the idea that the snail on earth was the equivalent of God in heaven.

But what kind of equivalence are we talking about here? Good question. No matter how hard I looked, I could find no text that described

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God as a snail, or a snail as God. Clearly, the God-Snail or the Snail-God has not been taken seriously by Christian exegesis. It's true that from my viewpoint (but not from yours), there is nothing to prevent a painter from coming up with a new exegesis—and, even more radically, nothing to prevent his painting from thinking for him. In other words, the configuration imagined by Cossa could, by itself, give rise to a meaning that its creator had not envisioned. I found my interpretation amusing and I often tried it out on my students. I only half believed it, but, in any case, it was not pointless; it showed them that it's possible to think when one looks at a painting, and that thinking isn't necessarily a bad thing. My idea, in fact, appealed to a famous medievalist when I proposed it to him long ago in Bologna. According to him, even if this snail were the only one of its kind, it wasn't unreasonable to imagine that it represented God the Father because, as he explained to me, one of the problems that preoccupies medieval exegetes is precisely the intolerable time lag that separates the Fall of Adam and Eve from the Annunciation. This time lag raises the question, among others, of Limbo and the horde of poor souls waiting there for the advent of the Savior—who goes there by the way, according to Saint Augustine, as soon as he dies, even before his Resurrection. So the question is: Because God had known for all eternity that he would incarnate himself in order to save us, why did he wait so long to do so? Why had he been so slow? In other words, why did he behave like a snail? The snail might thus be an excellent means for reminding us, in the context of an Annunciation, of the slowness with which God proceeded before he incarnated himself in such a dazzling way. Umberto admitted that he did not have a particular medieval text in mind to support what he was saying. However, he could, if I so desired, find one, and if he couldn't find one, he could write one himself; he had some experience in the matter.

The idea that the snail was there to remind us of the unfathomable slowness of God to incarnate himself was quite attractive. One could imagine that Cossa had used the snail, a well-known symbol of the Virgin, to give form to God as well, that he had condensed the two, in

which case the snail would become, by itself, the symbol of the Incarnation. However, rest assured that I was not convinced. What troubled me was the exceptional nature of this snail in painting. If it had really been conceivable to imagine not only Mary but also God in the shape of a snail, there would be additional examples in other representations of the Annunciation. And while I still cannot vouch for the fact that this snail is unique, I have yet to find any of its brothers or sisters; it is therefore difficult, historically speaking, to claim that it is a representation of God. You see that I haven't completely lost my senses. But nor have I given up trying to understand what that snail is doing there. Where Cossa places it implies that he attributes a particular meaning to it; he in fact did everything possible to draw our attention to it, so that we are forced to wonder about its presence. (When I say "we," I am also thinking primarily of the priest, because Cossa's *Annunciation* is an altarpiece; when the priest raised the Host to bless it, he could not help but see the snail right next to him, and perhaps he too wondered what it was doing there.) For a while this "problem of the snail" obsessed me and I wound up seeing in it the painter's appeal to my gaze, a question he was asking at the painting's edge of those who were looking at it and who, for centuries, would continue to look at it.

You know how it is: you think, you think, you get nowhere, and then all of a sudden, bingo!—you see. You see what was in front of your

eyes all along, what you hadn't yet seen even though it was, precisely, the most obvious thing. So it was that, one day, what the painting was silently showing me right in the foreground jumped out at me: this snail is enormous, gigantic, monstrous. If you don't believe me, just compare it to the size of Gabriel's foot, which is also directly in the foreground. I know that the shoe size of an angel cannot be measured but, as soon as Gabriel takes on a human form, as soon as he manifests himself *sub specie humana*, the same principle must apply, mutatis mutandis, to his foot—a human foot, therefore measuring somewhere between twenty-five to thirty centimeters in length and eight or nine centimeters in width. Now, by this standard, the incongruous gastropod would be some twenty centimeters long and eight or nine centimeters high! Enough is enough, too much is too much. In a word, this snail is quite out of proportion to what surrounds it; no comparison is possible. I could have tried to reflect on the reasons for this enormousness, but it would have complicated the iconographic interpretation of the creature even more. I preferred to face the facts. This snail is indeed painted on the painting but it is not *in* the painting. It is on its edge, at the boundary between its illusory space and the real space from which we observe it. This is the place of the snail that I mentioned earlier.

Don't act surprised. This is not the only time Cossa paints a figure as if it were in our space. A few years later, in the Hall of the Months in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, he also placed a figure at the edge of the representation: sitting on a low wall that corresponds to the plane of the wall in the exhibition hall, this figure's legs are dangling in front of it and thus seem to be invading the real space of the hall. Nor is Cossa the first or only one to paint this kind of detail. I have a good example for you: Filippo Lippi's *Annunciation* in the Santo Spirito church in Florence. Do you recall the transparent vase that Lippi placed in this painting, between Gabriel and Mary, at the edge of the painting in an indentation in the floor, half inside the representation and half outside? The comparison is all the more relevant because, while the snail is a rare metaphor for the impregnated Virgin, the transparent vase is,

on the contrary, a very well-known symbol: just as the side of the vase is penetrated by light without breaking, so too the Virgin, etcetera, etcetera. Well, it just so happens that the positioning of Cossa's snail is similar to that of Lippi's vase. Thus, set in an equivalent place in two paintings representing the same theme, and both alluding iconographically to the Immaculate Conception of Jesus, these two symbols of the Virgin, the snail and the vase, must play an equivalent role. But what role is that? Reread, if you've already read it, what Louis Marin writes about Lippi's vase. It is placed, according to Marin, at the "edge of the space represented on the pictorial surface and at the border of the space of presentation from which it is viewed"; it signals, so to speak, the locus of the "invisible exchange between the beholder's gaze and the painting": it marks the beholder's point of entry into the painting.

You say: Let's suppose that Marin put his finger on Filippo Lippi's idea. What relation can it possibly have to Francesco del Cossa's? How could Cossa have made a snail (even metaphorically) our point of entry into the painting? I'm claiming that, with its horns perked up and its eyes wide open, the gastropod encourages a particular way of seeing. But what way?

I'm going to disappoint you, but the answer is simple: one need only take the metaphor literally. Let's grant that a snail can be a symbol of the Virgin Mary, mother of God; we can also grant that the snail in no way resembles Mary visually: the Virgin never looked like a snail. To claim the contrary would be madness (confusing the object as sign with the object as thing), not to mention blasphemy. All of this makes sense in the allegorical context of the late Middle Ages. However, by placing his snail as he did, at the edge of the painting and not in the painting's fictional space but on its actual surface, Cossa in a sense positions it as a kind of epigraph or exergue to his work, and in so doing leads us to form the following mental equation: just as in reality a snail *is not like* the Virgin, this *Annunciation* that you are looking at *is not like* the Annunciation that occurred in Nazareth some fifteen hundred years ago. It's not simply a question of where it takes place or of how

the figures look—which is typical of the fifteenth century and, you can be sure, nothing like how they would have looked in Palestine immediately before the birth of Christ. It is, above all, a question of the painting, of the representation itself. The snail—a figure that does not resemble Mary placed like an inscription on the painting—leads us to understand that this painting is itself a poor, inevitably inadequate representation of the event it represents: the encounter between Gabriel and Mary, and its amazing implications that will justify its representation so many centuries later. In other words, the snail, symbol of Mary's divine insemination, leads us to perceive that a *representation* of the Annunciation will never make us see the providential reason for *the* Annunciation: the Incarnation of the Savior. Cossa's stroke of genius was to have pointed to the *limits* of representation by putting his snail at the threshold of this same representation, at its limit.

All that with a mere snail? This is when, despite everything I've just explained, you start talking about overinterpretation. And yet I stick to what I've said, and I have good reasons for doing so. First of all, in Ferrara at the same time, Cossa's colleague Cosmè Tura also painted an *Annunciation* whose majestic perspectival construction apparently had the same intention. This, at least, is the conclusion to which Stephen Campbell's impeccable analysis leads us. And then, Cossa is not the only one to have placed an animal or an object on the edge of his painting that questions the status of representation in this way. There is, for example, the apple and the squash (or cucumber) that Carlo Crivelli painted in 1484 at the edge of his *Annunciation* (now in the National Gallery in London). You say it's not the same thing? You're right: seeming to loom out of the plane of the painting, the squash works like a trompe l'oeil and, thanks to its positioning directly on the surface of the imaginary street, the incongruousness of its presence expresses above all the artifice of perspective and its visual achievements. In Crivelli's work, divine omnipotence scoffs at human geometry, as is forcefully demonstrated by the golden ray that, from the depths of the sky all the way to Mary's room, traverses the panel's surface in a strictly rectilinear way. By recalling the picture's materi-

Carlo Crivelli
The Annunciation, with Saint Emidius, 1486
National Gallery, London

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ality in this way, it negates the illusory depth of the represented space. Cossa's snail is not a trompe l'oeil because it is painted on the painting itself and does not loom out of its space. It is closer to the flies so often found painted directly on images. But those Flemish flies also belong to the category of trompe l'oeil. (Allow me to recount an anecdote here. I experienced just how effective those trompe l'oeil flies are when, entering a hall in the Metropolitan Museum, I thought from a distance that a big fat fly had landed on Crivelli's little *Virgin and Child*. I even remember being outraged that there could be flies in a museum, especially an American one. Only when I moved in to chase away the insect did I realize my mistake, with the thrill of someone who has been taken in by a magician. I felt a little stupid: I should have remembered that Crivelli liked to paint flies on his paintings. This is the kind of misadventure that could never befall you, of course. You never forget what you have already learned. Still, all things considered, I'd rather fall for this kind of trick and continue to be taken aback by the painting and its fly.)

But let's return to our snail. It is a locust that most resembles it—the one Lorenzo Lotto painted at the edge of one of his *Saint Jerome the Penitent* paintings, now in Bucharest. It, too, is disproportionate to the rest of the representation (it is almost as long as the saint's head is wide), and it obviously does not belong in the desert where the saint is doing his penitence. It is placed upon the painting but appears to be in our space. At first it seemed as if it had landed directly on the frame (now lost), at the border between the space represented in the painting and the space where the painting is presented to us by means of the frame and the locust. In other words, like Lippi's vase and Cossa's snail, Lotto's locust determines our gaze's point of entry into the painting. It does not tell us *what* we should look at, but *how* we should look at what we are seeing. I believe one can even say just *how* this locust wants us to look. There is no point in trying to figure out how locusts see. Lotto did not know or care. What he did know was what the locust could signify in painting. For one thing, the eighth plague visited by God upon Egypt to punish the pharaoh who resisted his will was a plague of locusts. A

Carlo Crivelli
Madonna and Child,
ca. 1480
Metropolitan Museum
of Art, New York

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locust can also sometimes be found painted in Jesus's hand, where by contrast it symbolizes the conversion of nations to Christianity. In the case of Lotto's *Saint Jerome the Penitent*, it has this second connotation. Marking the frontier where our space and the space of the painting meet and intermingle, the locust prompts us to enter the image mentally, to apply the image to ourselves (as the devout people of the seventeenth century were wont to say—and God knows Lotto was devout!), and to do in our world what Saint Jerome did in his. We are invited to flee earthly delights and defeat their enticements by delivering ourselves up entirely (even to the point of masochism) to the love of Christ.

Let's say you agree with me as far as the locust is concerned. In any case, Lotto was an odd fellow, and this interpretation of the painting is in perfect accord with what you know about him: "as virtuous as virtue itself," as Aretino (snidely) wrote to him—Aretino, who was such a fervent Christian that he, a Catholic, sympathized with Protestant Christocentrism and had himself buried in the sanctuary in Lorette, as close as possible to the Virgin's house, without a coffin, in the habit of a Third Order Dominican.

Unfortunately for you, I'm going to complicate things even more. Saint Jerome's locust does not elucidate the Virgin's snail. I merely took a little detour. Even though they are in the same spot and therefore are alike in some ways, they are not the same. There is one minuscule but critical element that distinguishes them. The locust is a desert animal. It is said that Saint John the Baptist fed on locusts when he had already taken refuge from the world, and they often accompany hermits in their mystical experiences. Lotto did not paint any locusts around his penitent (he only put in two serpents and a bird skeleton), and we can therefore imagine that, in a certain sense, it flew from the painting into our world, that it came out of the image the better to help us enter it. This is the "permeability"—to use Mauro Lucco's term—between the world of the painting and our own that the locust implies. And if this permeability can exist, it is because the presence of the locust is logical, predictable in Saint Jerome's world. The snail, on the contrary, has absolutely no reason

to be in Mary's palace, which is as clean as a whistle on this sunny, early spring day. Cossa's invention is even more bizarre, more surprising; it is, if I may be so bold, intellectual, theoretical. Ouch! I hit you where it hurts. You don't like theory. Still, it is indeed theory we're talking about here.

I'll say it once more: Cossa's snail is inseparable from the demonstration of perspective that serves as background to it. It is thanks to this background—on it and against it—that the snail is revealed to be outside the space of the painting. You don't follow? I'm having trouble expressing myself because I don't need theory to state what I mean. One simply needs to look at the painting. In fact, I *did* go to look at it again in Dresden. It was a good idea, for I got a double surprise. First, the painting is smaller than I had remembered it. I had studied it too much from reproductions, and even though its dimensions are always indicated (137 centimeters high and 113 centimeters wide), one doesn't grasp its size. The architecture of Mary's palace is so imposing that I had wound up imagining that the painting was very large. It isn't. And then, the second surprise: the snail isn't that enormous after all; it's a fine specimen of a snail, not a *petit-gris*, but probably a good old Burgundy snail about eight centimeters high. Go and look for yourself: when you're in front of the painting, the snail seems normal. It's the Virgin who is small—and this is where I was headed. In fact, by virtue of its disproportion, the snail acts as a spatial foil to the illusory depth of perspective and restores the material presence of the surface of the panel, of the medium of the representation. In fact, when I and an architect friend of mine drew a floor plan of the Virgin's palace, we found that it was absolutely impossible to build. It is only on the surface, superficially, that it is impressive. Its majestic stone walls are no thicker than wood partitions; the octagonal table on which Mary's book rests smashes right into the pillar next to it; the chest that acts as a base for the virginal bed is deep beyond measure, and so on. In sum, for the inquisitive person who allows him or herself to do what no fifteenth-century viewer would ever have dreamed of doing, geometry reveals that Francesco del Cossa was not trying to construct a strictly

realistic perspective. He is not Piero della Francesca; he merely needed to fake depth behind his figures. He constructs a theatrical space in order to represent (present again, or transform into a stage) the meeting between God and his creature.

So where is theory in all this? Be patient, I'm getting there. Set upon this space of representation and marking it as such, the snail shows us that we shouldn't let ourselves be taken in by the illusion that we see, that we shouldn't believe it. This is the heart of the paradox that Cossa establishes: it is after having performed a tour de force of perspective that the painter stealthily destroys the prestige of perspective. But—and you are right to insist—what are we not supposed to believe in, and why all the games? We're getting there.

Francesco del Cossa hadn't read Panofsky. He didn't know that perspective was going to become what the German scholar retrospectively defined as the "symbolic form" of a vision of the world that would be rationalized by Descartes and formalized by Kant. How could he know? What he did know, however, around 1470—and this historical nuance is sure to please you—is that perspective is a matter of measurement, that it was a recent instrument that allowed one to construct and to make people see the *commensurateness,* to use Piero della Francesca's word, of things. For Cossa, perspective constructs the image of a world that is commensurable in itself and in relation to the observer, according to one's viewpoint. And this world is not infinite. Only God is infinite. Cossa's world remains finite, closed, a world of which man is the measure. (In 1435, Alberti said much the same thing when, right before he opened his legendary window—which doesn't open out onto the world but onto the measured composition of the work—he referred to Protagoras and his famous saying that "man is the measure of all things.") No doubt, Francesco del Cossa knew that much about perspective. And we can, at this point, imagine what his idea of the Annunciation would have been in this context. In the 1430s the most famous preacher of the time, Bernardino of Siena (who was familiar enough with Ferrara to have declined its bishopric), had described something obvious in great detail:

the Annunciation is, with Mary's acceptance of it, the moment of the Incarnation. It is, among other things, and in the words of the preacher, the coming of the incommensurable into the commensurable, of the unfigurable into the figurable realm. Look at Cossa's painting. Where is God the Father? Where is the dove? You have to look hard to find them. With its commensurations, perspective has reduced God to a distant little figure in the sky, just above Gabriel. As for the dove, it is there in flight, not far from the Father; but you can hardly see it—it's the size of a fly speck. Perspective has taken over everything: How can it possibly let us see what the essence of the encounter is, its finality and its end, the Creator coming into the creature, the invisible into vision? This is what the snail is asking us, if not to see (*voir*), then at least to perceive (*percevoir*).

Once again, Cossa is not the only one who wanted to make the invisible presence of what escapes all measure break the visible surface of a commensurable image of the Annunciation. Fra Angelico, Piero, and Filippino Lippi are a few of the painters who refused to be satisfied with Alberti's diktat: "The painter deals only with that which can be seen." With his snail, Francesco del Cossa does this "à la Ferrara," in a way that is as precise as it is sophisticated. On the edge of the perspectival construction, on its threshold, the anomaly of the snail reaches out to you; it appeals to you to see differently and makes you understand that you are seeing nothing in what you are looking at. Or rather, in what you see, you fail to see what you are looking at, what you are looking for, what you are expecting to find, namely, the emergence of the invisible into the field of vision.

A final question: Did you know that gastropods can barely see? And worse: it seems they don't look at anything. They find their bearings differently. Despite the eyes at the end of their extended horns, they hardly see a thing; at most they can make out the intensity of the light; they get by on their sense of smell. Cossa most certainly didn't know that anymore than you did. But he didn't need to know it in order to make the snail stand for a blind gaze. I don't know what *you* think about that, but personally, it blows my mind.