LE BRICOLE

Pictures of Modernity
The Visual and the Literary
in England, 1850-1930

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Pictures of Modernity: The Visual and the Literary in England, 1850-1930

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EMMA SDEGNO

Ruskin's Optical Thought:
Tools for Mountain Representation

In this paper I draw attention to an optical tool that Ruskin had theorized in his early writings on architecture, as a technical implement to faithfully re-produce the natural datum in drawing. This instrument, which has never been taken into critical account, constitutes, in my view, a pivotal point in his early formulation of mimetic representation, shedding some light on Ruskin's verbal/visual awareness. It underlies his descriptions of Turner's vignettes in *Modern Painters* I as a major "lens" through which Ruskin first approaches the subject of the treatment of mountain sceneries.

There are quite a few studies in Ruskinian criticism that make a clear reference to vision in their titles: from Robert Hewison's, *The Argument of the Eye* (1976), to Elizabeth Helsinger's *John Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder* (1982), to Wolfgang Kemp's biography*, The Desire of my Eyes* (1983-1991), to the essays by J. D. Hunt's, "*Ut Pictura Poesis*: the Picturesque, and John Ruskin" (1978), and G. L. Hersey's: "Ruskin as an Optical Thinker" (1982)[1]. All of them were written in less than a decade between the late 1970s and the mid 1980s and although they did not always face the problem in a technical way as promised by the title they took visuality as their main subject. Recent

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[1] J. D. HUNT, "*Ut Pictura Poesis*: the Picturesque, and John Ruskin", *MLN*, 93.5 (1978), sub-sequently collected in H. BLOOM (ed.), *John Ruskin*, New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 1986; G. L. HERSEY, "Ruskin as an Optical Thinker", in *The Ruskin Polygon*, edited by D. J. Hunt and F. M. Holland, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1982, pp. 44-64.

comprehensive studies on Ruskin have shifted the focus to broader cultural subjects – such as Ruskin and gender, Ruskin and religion, Ruskin and the ideological and political issues centred on the construction of nineteenth-century national identity. Such studies have expanded the corpus of biographical material by publishing a host of fresh and very interesting iconographical material, which will need to be taken into account in order to update not only our knowledge of Ruskin's life, but also aspects connected to his visual attitude[2].

In taking up the topic of Ruskin's "visual thought" I shall mostly refer to the criticism of thirty years ago or so, and in particular to Hersey's and D. J. Hunt's essays, which have made reference to some technical tools supporting or underlying Ruskin's approach.

Hersey's essay highlights the characteristics of an "optical mode of thinking" considering it as an atemporal category. After broadly defining Ruskin as "the intense starer at himself and his world, a contemplator who tended to dissolve his vision of the human self into one of landscape", Ruskin is compared to Leonardo da Vinci, for the endeavour he constantly pursued to fuse art, optics and the scientific study of nature. There are various links connecting Ruskin to Leonardo, from the "chaotic and incomplete" nature of their writings, to their way of writing in a "visual or optical" rather than "verbal way". A visual thinker is thus sketchily defined by contrast with the verbal one, as someone proceeding through juxtaposition rather than sequence, simultaneity rather than consequence, appearance rather than time, through gaps and "branchings-off" rather than linearity. While we are induced from this description to think of such characteristics as somehow "genetic", Hersey points out that the origin of such a mode of being may derive from a "prolonged, energetic contemplation of landscape, and of works of art, [generating] in certain elect minds a system of thought, of logic, of arrangement, that is very different from that of those who are immersed in a purely verbal culture". Thus Ruskin is seen as belonging to the long line of "echphrastic writers" ranging from Renaissance authors such as Marsilio Ficino, Giambattista Marino, and Edmund Spenser, to John Keats, the Pre-Raphaelites, and Walter Pater, sharing with the latter writers a peculiarly modern obsession with details. Hersey ends up by defining the *Stones of Venice* and *Mod-*

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[2] See R. HEWISON, I. WARRELL, S. WILDMAN, *Ruskin, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites*, London, Tate Gallery Publishing, 2000; P. WALTON, *Master Drawings by John Ruskin*, from a private collection, London, Pilkington Press, 2000; J. S. DEARDEN, *John Ruskin: A Life in Pictures*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1999, which puts together a whole gallery of painted portraits, daguerreotypes and caricatures of Ruskin.

ern Painters as specifically Victorian "theatres of memory". If the essay had meant to establish the characteristics of what an "optical thought" was in general terms and as a universal category, through the contrast between a verbal and a visual system, it ended up by rooting these qualities within Ruskin's own time, by pointing at an optical instrument such as the "magnifying glass", which works, in Hersey's argument, as a broad "epistemic tool", rather than a means or "shaper" of Ruskin's personal vision.

J. D. Hunt's essay raises a more specific point concerning the role of optical instruments in Ruskin's visual approach, which he sees as deeply rooted in eighteenth-century aesthetics of the picturesque. Hunt points at Ruskin's interest and employment of mirrors throughout his work, as a mark of his legacy to eighteenth-century gardening theories and practice. References to mirrors, and in particular to the convex mirror of Claude's glass seem not only to be implied in the descriptive passages from the *Poetry of Architecture* to *Modern Painters*, but also to surface through his later work as a powerful figure of speech.

If we can acknowledge the validity of these optical objects on the metaphorical more than referential level – Claude's glass, as Hunt states, was probably never used by Ruskin although references to mirrors are pervasively present throughout his later work –, we should also consider another optical tool which Ruskin himself pointed at and discussed at length, in the late 1830s, as the fittest means to obtain a faithful reproduction of a landscape. It constitutes an alternative version of the magnifying lens and convex glass, and works both on the metaphorical and the literal levels, implicitly shaping, as it were, Ruskin's aesthetic approach to vision as well as his descriptive mode in the first two volumes of *Modern Painters*. As a matter of fact, Ruskin's discourse on this visual tool in some passages of *Modern Painters* I also involves a theoretical reflection on the different set of codes governing visual and verbal languages, as well as on the complex semiotic passages involved in the act of transcodification from visual perception to the iconic sign.

1. *Through a window pane*

In a series of articles Ruskin published in the *Architectural Magazine* in the years 1837-1839 later collected in the *Poetry of Architecture*, under the pseudonym of Kata Phusin, Ruskin discussed at length the means by which one could faithfully represent the datum both in landscape painting and ar-

chitectural drawing. The articles deal with the modes of rendering the external referent through watercolour and engraving. The debate was initiated by Arthur Parsey – Professor of miniature painting and perspective – in his book *Perspective Rectified*, where a new method for correcting perspective drawing was expounded. The debate continued in a series of articles by Ruskin and Parsey that at one stage involved the architect Wilmer Pocock. It is at the end of his article of May 1st 1838 that Ruskin stated and perfected his theory of the "window pane" as an instrument of representation as well as a model of vision. The object is first of all an optical tool: Ruskin points at it as a device the draughtsman can use to faithfully draw the outline of a building as well as of a landscape at a distance. In a tense and very technical exchange of points of view all the aspects of the topic are dealt with, so as to outline a complete theory, in which both the method of proceeding and its objectives are made clear. By minutely describing the working of this tool Ruskin strenuously maintained the possibility of faithfully perceiving and reproducing the external world, since the image traced on the glass is said to be "exactly correspondent with the image of the retina, that is, must occupy the space of glass through which the pencil of rays coming from the object to the eye is passing" (*WR,* I, p. 227)[3]. Against Parsey he denied any substantial "delusiveness" of the window pane; defended the idea of the equivalence between the angle of lines in nature and the ones reproduced on the paper; and put forward his theory of "the right point of observation", maintaining that the problem posed by perspective was not that of adjusting or translating the visual datum into a different numerical scale, but rather for the spectator to find and adjust himself naturally to the right point of observation, stressing the fact that his system, like all systems, implied a fixed viewpoint. The window pane is therefore the transparent interface assuring a perfect translatability of the outward datum into the form of the drawing; it implied a fixed point of observation, which is apparently the only possible one for each view. In a subsequent article Ruskin develops the subject of the position of the spectator, by dealing with the subject of the shape of pictures. He considers at length the reasons for the superiority of the square over the circular form, and eventually comes to a definition of the window frame as an analogue of the canvas:

> Now we have gone through the whole of this argument merely to prove what some might be inclined to dispute, – that the edge, or frame, of the picture,

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[3] All references from Ruskin's works are to the Library Edition, E. T. COOK and A. WEDDER-BURN (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols., London, G. Allen, 1903-1912.

though rectangular, is, *bona fide*, the representative of the natural limit of sight; *it is not an arbitrary enclosure* of a certain number of touches, or a certain quantity of colour, within 4 straight lines; nor is it to be extended or diminished as the artist wishes to include more or fewer objects; it is clearly representative of a fixed natural line as any part of the design itself, and its size and form are, therefore, regulated by laws of perspective as distinct as inviolable (*WR,* I, p. 241. Italics added).

Ruskin ends his article by proposing the vignette as the best means of rendering a landscape view in book illustrations, with its out of focus boundaries framing the scene, and makes continuous references to Turner's illustrations of Rogers's *Italy* and *Poems*. The discourse on the vignette as a means of landscape representation was then taken up in the essay that put an end to the debate, which was published in *Architectural Magazine* in February 1839. This essay later appeared in a long note to a posthumous collection of Humphrey Repton's writings on landscape architecture and gardening[4]. The note, whose title was "On the Proper Shapes of Pictures and Engravings" was again signed by Kata Phusin, and provided a theoretical support explaining and justifying the editor's choice of having employed vignette illustrations in this new comprehensive edition of Repton's writings. The editor was Loudon, the director of the *Architectural Magazine* and a friend of Ruskin's, and this in some way would explain the reference to the article as well as the emphasis which was given to it, but the inclusion in itself should also be seen as an acknowledgement of the originality and authoritativeness of Ruskin's discourse. The insertion of Ruskin's essay within Repton's book can be seen as the first step of a discourse on landscape art, which he would take up and greatly amplify in *Modern Painters* I. Repton's posthumous book is a defence of an idea of painting in line with that of Capability Brown and in contrast with that of Uvedale Price and Payne Knight, who both maintained that landscape architecture had to start from the Old Masters, whose landscape settings had to be taken as models to shape the gardeners' realizations.

This essay takes up the issues of vision and perspective discussed in the previous essays, and deals in great detail with the optical laws involved in the perception of a framed landscape, comparing the appropriateness of square and round frames. Ruskin states that, in spite of the fact that the

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[4] *The Landscape Gardening and Landscape Architecture of the Late Humphry Repton Esq., being his entire works on these subjects. A new edition, with an historical and scientific introduction, a systematic analysis, a biographical notice, notes and a copious alphabetical index*, by J. C. Loudon, London, F. L. S., 1840.

round shape is seen as corresponding to the form of the rays of vision, for a picture the parallelogram was to be preferred. Among the reasons for its superiority, he considers the verticality of the plane of the picture, which would correspond to the verticality of the scene and, by referring to mountains and buildings, his discourse seems to particularly apply to objects whose main formal characteristic is verticality. Then in dealing with pictorial composition he devotes great attention to the ways the object appears from a definite distance:

> [...] when an artist is *composing* his picture, he supposes the distribution of sight, [or] the attention of the eye, to be perfect; and considers only that indistinct and undetailed proportion of forms and colours, which is best obtained from the finished drawing by half closing, and thus throwing a dimness over the eye. But, in finishing, he works on quite a different principle. One locality is selected by him, as chiefly worthy of the eye's attention; to that locality he directs it almost exclusively. Supposing only such partial distribution of sight over the rest of the drawing, as may obtain a vague idea of the tones and forms which set off and relieve the leading feature. Accordingly, as he recedes from this locality, his tones become fainter, his drawing more undecided, the lights less defined, in order that the spectator may not find any point disputing for authority with the leading idea (*WR,* I, p. 243).

Therefore, following the eye's perception, in transferring the image onto canvas the artist closes his locality and refines it rather than the other parts of the picture, and in this way he is faithful to the "natural effect", which will coincide, for the spectator, with the picture's "leading idea". In the article Ruskin is willing to demonstrate the "necessary" nature of the parallelogram as the best shape for pictures, in that it corresponds to the natural limits of sight.

Moreover, by perfecting the idea of the window pane Ruskin is not only providing a technical means for the draughtsman, but he is also foregrounding the different stages in the process of transcodification from the referent to the signifier, facing the problem of the isomorphism of the two. Far from being a naive assertor of the "natural" view, by fixing and transcoding the object into the means of the vignette, Ruskin presents a tool which would abstract the characteristic lines of the object, thus effecting that semiotization of the referent which is an essential passage leading to the production of the signifier.

After having dealt with the representation of objects near the limits of sight – "If in *any* picture, [...] the right lines of the edge cease to be the limit of sight; they come distinctly and positively within the sphere of vision; they

cut painfully upon the eye, [...]" – Ruskin finally insists on the importance of respecting these limits of sight, and also refers to the engraving technique for the representation of details. The long debate finished, typically, at the point at which it had started, by referring to Turner's vignette at length as the best example of the mimetic theory of natural representation he had outlined.

The interest of this debate lies in Ruskin's attempt to study and empirically observe the phenomena of vision, and subsequently apply these observations to his ideas of mimesis. Rather than supplying a metaphor for realistic painting[5], in these *Architectural Magazine* essays Ruskin was providing a technical model for his idea of mimesis. The stress on the fixed position of the viewer becomes of great importance: it is both an extremely definite and a shifting stance, a variable element which only if put in the right position would enable a perfectly faithful reproduction. The centrality of vision is thus scientifically pursued by Ruskin, and the practice of drawing is of paramount importance to understand his "optical thought", as it surfaces through his writings.

As we have seen, in trying to find a means to pass from the perceptual vision to the reproduced image, he continually found himself caught in attempts to come to terms with the "thick" element constituting the specificity of the means. These issues will surface again in *Modern Painters* I, in the chapters on the "Truth of Earth", where he comes back to Turner's vignettes and indirectly to the theoretical discussion that they had supported, by recasting those illustrations in the words of description. In this new context Ruskin thus seems to make a further step in the reflection on the intersemiotic passages from observed natural objects to illustrated images.

2. *Contextualizations*

Before considering the mountain views that Ruskin displays through the lens of Turner's vignettes, we need to make two theoretical references which concern the window pane as a tool of visual representation, by tracing its

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[5] In *Modern Painters* I, Ruskin rejects the window image as a metaphor for faithful reproduction. We find there a reference to the window as an obsolete and failing means of stating the truthfulness/objective nature of representation. "M. de Marmontel", says Ruskin, going to a connoisseur's gallery, "pretends to mistake a fine Berghem for a window. […] Such is indeed a notion of art, which is at the bottom of the veneration usually felt for the old landscape painters, [was] the palpable, first idea of ignorance" (*WR,* III, pp. 165-6). The sentence and the context of discourse do not clearly explain what "the source of ignorance" was, but we can easily infer that it was the primacy of art over nature, which Ruskin would never state.

more likely ancestor in architectural representation, and by hinting at its more direct descendant.

Ruskin's window pane is certainly to be considered among the various "perspectographs", that is, optical machines which since the Renaissance had been theorized to solve optical and compositional problems in painting[6]. Certainly Ruskin's "window" recalls, for example, the instrument Albrecht Dürer used for portrait and still life paintings and had described in his *Underweysung der Messung*. Although in the articles there are no reference to any of them, we cannot ignore that Ruskin's debate might have implied its knowledge. However, I would like to point at the earliest model of these optical machines, the one theorized by Leon Battista Alberti, in that a reference seems to surface through the text not only as a possible model of Ruskin's window pane, but also as a key term in his representation of mountain landscape. In the history of architectural representation, a context which is to be investigated referring to Ruskin's debate in the *Architectural Magazine*, the closest tool that we can find to Ruskin's window pane is probably Alberti's "veil". Like Ruskin's glass window Alberti's "velo" is an everyday object whose transparent interface acts both as a visual model and as an instrument of representation. In his treatise *De Pictura* (1434-1435), Alberti advises the draughtsman to put between the architecture he wants to draw and the canvas an "intersegazione", or "velo" – intersection or veil – which would enable him to clearly follow the objects' outlines. Alberti also speaks about changes in distance as factors which completely alter the drawn image:

> Egli è uno velo sottilissimo, tessuto raro, tinto di quale a te piace colore, distinto con fili più grossi in quanti a te piace paraleli, qual velo pongo tra l'occhio e la cosa veduta, tale che la pirramide visiva penetra per la rarità del velo. Porgeti questo velo certo non picciola commodità: primo, che sempre ti ripresenta medesima non mossa superficie, dove tu, posti certi termini, subito ritruovi la vera cuspide della pirramide, qual cosa certo senza intercisione sarebbe difficile; [...] Di qui pertanto sono più facili a ritrarre le cose dipinte che le scolpite. E conosci quanto, mutato la distanza e mutato la posizione del centro, paia quello che tu vedi molto alterato. Adunque il velo ti darà, quanto dissi, non poca utilità ove sempre a vederla sarà una medesima cosa. L'altra sarà utilità che tu potrai facile constituire i termini degli orli e delle superficie[7].

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[6] For an extensive treatment of optical machines see M. KEMP, *The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat*, New Haven - London, Yale University Press, 1990.

[7] L. B. ALBERTI, *De Pictura*, edited by C. Grayson, Bari, Laterza, 1988, Book II, par. 31. "I believe nothing more convenient can be found than the veil, which among my friends I call the intersection, and whose usage I was the first to discover. It is like this: a veil loosely wo-

It is interesting to recall that the term "veil" occurs several times in Ruskin's work, and often it applies to the representational plane, with a possible implicit reference to Alberti's optical model similar to his window pane. The first time we find it is in the *Stones of Venice,* in a passage where we find a significant, direct and slightly disparaging reference to Vitruvius, the Latin "father" of Alberti. In this context the term "veil" applies to the façade of a building, which is equated to a mountain surface, effecting an identification between the referent and the painted reproduction, pointing at the same time to the surface of the architectural object and to the drawing of it. Alberti's velo might therefore well be implied by this reference to the veil as the building's surface to be painted and the painted surface. The occurrence of the term would thus get an additional denotation if we see it rooted in the architectural lexicon employed by Alberti. The same lexicon seem to be still partly active in *Modern Painters* IV, where the term reoccurs applied to mountains in a discourse which is devoted to the vision and representation of mountains at a distance. In this context the term would convey the sense of the impossibility of faithfully seizing its "truth", implying, at the same time, the technical means to attempt to do it through drawing.

If Alberti might lie behind Ruskin's theory of the window pane, the contemporary context should not be overlooked either. The years 1837-1839, when the articles in *The Architectural Magazine* had appeared, are also the years when indefatigable attempts were made to try to sort out, by chemical means, an impressed image from a metal surface through a pane of glass. The last of these articles, subsequently republished in Sir Humphrey Repton's collection of *Essays on Landscape Gardening and Architecture* (1840) was completed in February 1839, one month after the declaration of the birth

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ven of fine thread, dyed whatever colour you please, divided up by thicker threads into as many parallel square sections as you like, and stretched on a frame. I set this up between the eye and the object represented, so that the visual pyramid passes through the loose weave of the veil. This intersection of the veil has many advantages, first of all because it always represents the same surface unchanged, for once you have fixed the position of the outlines, you can immediately find the apex of the pyramid you started with, which is extremely difficult to do without the intersection. You know how impossible it is to paint something which does not continually present the same aspect. This is why people can copy paintings more easily than sculptures, as they always look the same. You also know that, if the distance and the position of the centric ray are changed, the thing seen appears to be altered. So the veil will give you the not inconsiderable advantage I have indicated, namely that the object seen will always keep the same appearance. A further advantage is that the position of the outlines and the boundaries of the surfaces can easily be established accurately on the painting panel; [...]" (L. B. Alberti, *On Painting*, edited by M. Kemp, translated by C. Grayson, London, Penguin, 2004, pp. 65-6).

of the daguerreotype and calotype. If there is a coincidence, with a slight anticipation, with respect to what painters were doing at the eve of the birth of the daguerreotype[8], on a theoretical level the articles seem to acknowledge this gestation period. Thus we can say that by raising issues and facing matters concerning the problems of realistic, mimetic, iconic representation these articles constitute a remarkable document in the history of photography. From this theoretical standpoint, Ruskin's observations would seem to focus on some issues that were to become the centre of debates after the invention of the daguerreotype. The 1839 article in particular deals with the shape and size of the vignette, making extensive considerations on the scope of the eye's lens, the distance from the scene that the painter has sighted, and the technical limitations as factors to take into account in the selection and treatment of the subject. As the fading edges of the vignette engraving were also those of the daguerreotype, we cannot but think that in his final discourse on the vignettes, Ruskin was also thinking about the daguerreotype, on the afterday of its birth.

3. *Mountain vignettes*

If in the essays in the *Architectural Magazine* Ruskin may be anticipating Fox Talbot's definition of photography as the "pencil of nature"[9], he also charges his discourse with an awareness of the semiotic nature of the passages from the referent to the object which is often absent from early reflections on photography[10]. An awareness which is further developed in the final parts of *Modern Painters* I, "Of Truth of Chiaroscuro" and "Of Truth of

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[8] See J. WOOD, *The Scenic Daguerreotype: Romanticism and Early Photography*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1995, p. 8.

[9] F. TALBOT, *The Pencil of Nature*, London, Longman, 1844.

[10] Ruskin here anticipates, with an opposite aim, the objections raised recently by J. Snyder against the likeness between the photographic reproduction and sight, yet avoiding the relevant issue of the semiotic passage from one means to the other. Snyder writes: "To begin with. Our vision is not formed within a rectangular boundary, it is, per Aristotle, unbounded. Second, even if it were to close one eye and place a rectangular fame of the same dimensions as the original negative at a distance from the eye equal to the focal length of the lens (the so-called distance point of perspective construction) and then look at the field represented in the picture, we would still not see what is shown in the picture. The photograph shows everything in sharp delineation from edge to edge, while our vision, because our eyes are faveate, is sharp only at its 'center'. The picture is monochromatic, while most of us see in 'natural' colour. Finally, the photograph shows objects in sharp focus and in and across every plane, from the nearest to the farthest. We do not – because we cannot – see things this way". See J. SNYDER, "Picturing Vision", *Critical Inquiry*, 5.3 (Spring 1980), p. 505.

Earth". Discourse is largely based there on the description of Turner's vignettes in Samuel Roger's *Italy* and *Poems*, the same vignettes Ruskin had considered in the essays in the *Architectural Magazine* that we have just discussed. In dealing with the mountain subject Ruskin follows a mode which is recurrent in *Modern Painters* I, but which is absolutely dominant here. By this rhetorical mode the reader is made to confront two natural views: the one taken from "life" and the other from Turner's vignettes to conclude that the two actually overlap. This technique is pervasively enacted in the three chapters on "Truth of Earth", but in particular in chapters 2 and 3, devoted to the central and inferior mountains.

At this stage Ruskin is openly voicing a mimetic idea of painting, based on the painting-window identification. Under the assumption of the "transparency" of the pictorial means in Turner's hands, Ruskin provides a series of natural descriptions which actually turn out to be refined, formalistic descriptions of mountain scenery. He attempts to find the universal and general laws of the mountain landscape, which he divides into the central and inferior regions and foreground, thus inscribing the external data within visual frames that correspond to the sections of the painting, and at the same time he reduces the natural space to abstracting forms and lines. In fact, by identifying some lines and structures in the landscape, such as parallelism, symmetry, perpendicularity, as the forms the details seem to have at a distance, Ruskin actually reduces the external datum to an artifact, a composed "landscape", which will only precede the description of each of Turner's landscape vignettes. Ruskin's formalistic approach to landscape shows his sensitivity towards the mediated nature of landscape perception, the fact that landscape is a cultural and aesthetic construct which cannot be perceived without some frames. As for the process of transcodification from the visual to the verbal, especially in the early writings, the written text conceives of the visual representation as a framing and focussing landscape device. This awareness is not openly articulated in theoretical terms yet, but rather it surfaces through the more and more elaborate argumentative and rhetorical forms of his discourse. Ruskin considers all the phenomena that relate to a mountain view which can ideally occur within the window's scope of vision, referring to direct observation, although, as the reader will later realize, the views that had been displayed correspond to the ones he can get from the "windows" of Turner's vignettes of Rogers's *Italy* and *Poems* [plates 1, 2, 3 and 4] – a little gallery whose subjects range from *The Alps at Daybreak*, *Aosta*, *Arona*, among others.

Ruskin thus takes into account different mountain scenes in the search for

the constant laws in the composition of a landscape. But, if we pay careful attention to the descriptive mode we find that his referent is almost invariably pictorial: he is composing natural landscapes through their painted representations. In these early chapters the reference to the actual mountains is not given, and when this occasionally occurs the actual scene is presented in the form of the example following a statement on general laws[11]. Thus Ruskin's discourse revolves around the ocular, eminently visual aspect, starting from the represented scenery and inquiring into the mode in which it is painted without apparently questioning the object itself.

Ruskin's reference is to Turner's vignettes, published in Rogers's collections *Poems* (1832), and *Italy* (1836), which constituted the earliest influential textbook that introduced Ruskin as a boy to Turner's art. Turner's vignette engravings in Rogers's collections thus constituted a published portfolio of drawings that chapters 2 and 3 of "Truth of Earth" in *Modern Painters* I could count upon vicariously, since, as we know, the first and second volumes were conceived of and published with no pictures. Moreover, besides this practical circumstance, I think that some specific compositional aims might also have led Ruskin to deal extensively – and exclusively – with Turner's vignettes in the last chapters of *Modern Painters* on mountain landscape, and not in other chapters in the volume. In these vignettes on mountain subjects we find the characteristics of mountain phenomena occurring on a somewhat regular basis. Each vignette is thus a "window" through which Ruskin observes a mountain view, by reconciling his aim at full mimetic representation – how to draw all the lines in a landscape scenery – with a principle of selection on the basis of the typical.

Ruskin is interested here in the specificity of mountain scenery in its general terms, rather than in the representation of a definite, particular place. This is stated time and again in the course of his descriptions, and with a particular emphasis in his account of *Jacqueline,* a passage he deleted when he revised the volume for its republication in 1856. The passage states the underlying compositional concern, and it does so rhetorically by evoking a referent that surfaces as a necessary derivation from the drawing. Quite characteristically Ruskin introduces Turner's vignette in the terms of its exceptionality and uniqueness, through a massively alliterating pattern.

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[11] See, for example, the end of his treatment of the "aqueous action": "The south side of Saddleback, in Cumberland, is a characteristic example; and the Montagne of Taconnay, in Chamonix, a noble instance of one of these ridges or buttresses, with all its subdivisions, on a colossal scale" (*WR,* III, p. 316).

> Of all the **p**ieces of **m**ountain elevation that ever were **p**ut u**p**on **p**a**p**er, **p**erha**ps** thi**s** i**s** the **m**ost **s**oaring and i**mp**re**ss**ive. The drea**m**y fain**tn**e**ss** of their **m**i**gh**ty **st**rength, the **p**erfe**ct st**illne**ss** and **s**i**l**en**ce** of their di**st**ant **s**l**ee**p, and the fu**ln**e**ss** of **s**un**l**i**gh**t in **w**hich they are **b**ath**ed** and **l**o**st**, a**w**ay the **m**ind **w**ith the**m** li**k**e a d**ee**p **m**e**l**ody, and through a**ll** th**i**s, through the aerial di**mn**e**ss** out of **w**hich they ri**s**e **like spect**r**es**, are told the **f**a**ct**s and fo**rm**s **w**hich **sp**eak of their rea**l**ity **like** their o**w**n e**ch**o**es**".

The qualities of the scenery are presented through substantives, which evoke a fading and dreamy atmosphere, through the repetition of sibilant sounds and conjunctions: MTS MST; PT ST LL SLS SS STT SP; L N SS S L T W B L ST. The sibilants contribute to give the passage a fading sense, foregrounding the terms "stillness" and "silence". The echo effect is continuously aimed at, and there is a tendency to deprive the object evoked of any sense of mass and weight: "the dreamy faintness of their mighty strength/perfect stillness and silence of their distant sleep/fulness of sunlight in which they are bathed and lost". The image is dissolving in the sibilants of "fulness of sunlight". Through this process of form dissolution mountains are thus made pure light and are lost in it: silence and appearance are then evoked through comparisons with vehicles which pertain to the semantic areas of music and the spectral – "like a deep melody", "like spectres". The process through which, by means of these comparisons, the representation of the scene is deprived of consistency and shape is actually uncovered in the final statement, where the "reality" of "facts and forms" is eventually dissolved through a twofold distancing: by means of a comparison where the spectral and the auditory levels become fused in the echo figure. If the discourse frame sets us in an unidentified place, the rest of the passage performs a curious operation of recalling a reality starting from the drawing, through the insistent repetition of "as surely", "so surely" as it *must* be in nature, thus charging the illustration with the authority to determine its referent, and stand for it:

> For instance, the highest range of rock on the extreme left is precisely the place where, in nature, there would be a little plateau or level, retiring back to the foot of the supreme summit; and *as surely* as there would be such a level, a kind of breathing time in the mountain before it made its last spring, *so surely* would that little plain be loaded with a glacier, *so surely* would that glacier advance to the brow of the precipice, and *so surely* would it hang over it, in the white tongue which in the vignette descends over the precipice exactly under the highest snow peak.

The evocative power of each brushstroke is expressed through per-locutionary verbs – with a repeated insistence on the verb "tell" – that give the scene a sense of necessity: the reader can imagine a scene, and recreate it starting from the illustration. Starting from the referential implications of two formal, apparently trifling compositional elements, a "bit of white" and a dark line, the painting thus reveals a reality which is displayed:

> Observe how much this single bit of white <u>tells</u> us. It <u>tells</u> us that there is a gla-cier above those cliffs, of consistency and size; it <u>tells</u> us, therefore, that there is a comparatively level space on which the fallen snow can accumulate; and it <u>tells</u> us, therefore, that the white summits are a mile or two farther back than the rocks below them; and to make all this doubly clear, the black moraine invariably left by the falling snow at the edge of such plain, where it first alights, is marked by the dark line crossing, nearly horizontally, under the central peak. All this speaks home at once, if we had but knowledge enough to understand it; and, be it re-membered, this same white and dark touch would be equally a dead letter to us in nature herself, if we had not. A person among the Alps for the first time in his life would probably not even notice the little tongue of ice hanging over the precipice, much less would comprehend how much it <u>told</u>. It could only be some one long acquainted with mountains who could <u>tell</u> you the width of the plateau, and how many chamois were likely to be upon it. I might name many other works of Turner, in which the same Alpine truth is carried out; but this alone would be sufficient to prove his unapproached superiority, at least over the an-cients (*WR,* III, p. 436).

Ruskin develops all the potentialities of the painting and of the scenery start-ing from a compositional element in the picture, the spot of white, which can "tell" about the scene. Representation is attained through little synthetic spots. The scene is evoked, not as a representation, but as a "tale" which starts from just a bit of white. The landscape is therefore reconstructed by imbuing a white spot of painting with a referentiality that comes from the ac-tual knowledge of the place. The language of the illustration that Ruskin de-codes thus brings to the fore the semiotic function of the painted sign, of the white spot of painting, and of "the dark line crossing". In translating for his readers the language of vignette engraving, Ruskin is foregrounding the in-tersemiotic passage between the two codes. The painted scene is thus de-prived of any consistency, it is an "echo", a translation of a scene in aural terms, at the same time, Ruskin proceeds to decode the signs, filling them with the elements that must compose the real scene, thus saturating it. The argument of necessity, "it must be like this", sets the discourse frame in the domain of the hypothetical, avoiding imposing the reality of facts on the

scene. The painted scene and its referent are then the same thing and two completely different ones, like the glass window and the actual scene. The passage has clearly displayed his mode of presenting the description of nature by centering upon the vignette illustration, thus blurring and blotting out the referent. Moreover, landscape appears to be disconnected from the actual circumstances, generalized and confined to a timeless realm. The deictic function of the object cannot be inferred from the painted sign, and is established by a rhetoric which fixes it on a where and where in a hypothetical way. It is through his verbal description that Ruskin attempts to give a deictical function to the vignette, whose visual model implied, instead, generalization.

The model of vision underlying these illustrations point at the atemporal, decorporealized, and transcendental, and is based on the premises that are at the basis of his theoretical statements on perspective in the *Architectural Magazine*. They seem in fact to reflect what has been defined as the "inherently transcendental premises of the Cartesian scopic regime", which were also shared by Leon Battista Alberti[12]. In this sense we can say that in these descriptions Ruskin seems to read the vignettes by foregrounding the deictical function of the object, which would be caught by the daguerreotype[13]. Our impression that Ruskin looks at Turner's vignettes as a medium closer to the daguerreotype is enhanced by an element of style. This element depends on the mimetic nature of Ruskin's writing, the materiality of the vignette, the "matter" as well as the subject-matter, seems thus to actually enter Ruskin's description. In fact, far from being "transparent" means, the watercolour, the oil-painting, and the vignette techniques actually enter the texture of his discourse impressing a mark of their thickness on it. By carefully reading the passages that illustrate Turner's vignettes we shall notice that we do not have any substantial reference to those chromatic effects that are so widely present in the previous chapters of volume I. Having recalled the

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[12] As M. Jay points out: "Individual perspective did not [matter] as the deictical specificity of the subject could be bracketed out in any cognitive endeavour. The same assumption informed the Albertian concept of painterly perspective, all beholders would see the same grid of orthogonal lines converging on the same vanishing point, if he gazed through, as it were, the same camera obscura. Perspective in this sense was atemporal, decorporealized, and transcendental" (M. JAY, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley - London, University of California Press, 1994, p. 189).

[13] See J. BERGER, *Ways of Seeing*, London, Penguin Books, 1972, p. 18: "the camera isolated momentary appearances and in so doing destroyed the idea that images were timeless. Or to put it another way, the camera showed that the notion of time passing was inseparable from the experience of the visual (except in paintings). What you saw depended upon where you were and when. What you saw was relative to your position in time and space".

sceneries by looking through the window panes of Turner's vignettes, Ruskin has described his mountain landscapes in terms of mass, outline and light, which therefore prove utterly colourless, made out of black and white contrasts.

4. *Sublime views?*

By identifying the geometric lines in Turner's vignette Ruskin gives an eighteenth-century connotation to Turner's illustration as well as to his view of mountains, which points to Addison's idea of beauty as "the symmetry and proportion of parts, in the arrangement and disposition of bodies, or in a just mixture and concurrence of all together"[14]. Throughout the chapter on the central mountains, Ruskin performs a geometrical rendering of mountain landscape, fixing the position of the observer in relation to his view. He also provides a definition of landscape that takes distance as the constituting factor: "Now, whenever those vast peaks, rising from 12,000 to 24,000 feet above the sea, form part of anything like a landscape; that is to say, whenever the spectator beholds them from the region of vegetation, or even from a distance at which it is possible to get something like a view of their whole mass, they must be at so great distance from him as to become aerial and faint in all their details" (*WR,* III, p. 434). From such a landscape distance, mountains will appear as diaphanous and transparent, and they will lose all solidity as well as any sense of greatness. Ruskin's study of central mountain – mostly Alpine – scenery is made from this remote distance, where the view appears made of "pure, roseate and cloud-like lights" and their shadows "transparent, pale and opalescent" (*WR,* III, p. 435). It is this faraway distance that gives the mountain object a fading, ethereal appearance – depriving it of greatness as a sublime connotation. Ruskin singles out the "universal laws" that underlie the mountain scenery and identifies multiplicity of form as a constituting factor. It is "oceanic" he says, it is this element so characteristic of Ruskin's aesthetic which introduces the idea of greatness and limitlessness. Multitudinousness of outline and mass, carefully observed from a distance, loses all solidity. Ruskin proceeds to give a faint image of

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[14] J. ADDISON, *Works*, edited by G. W. Green, New York, 1857, vol. VI, *Spectator* 411. For an extensive treatment of the aesthetic of mountain landscape in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries my reference is to M. H. NICOLSON, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development off the Aesthetics of the Infinite*, Seattle - London, University of Washington Press, (1959) 1977, p. 312.

it: "These successive ridges [...] even as low as 3000 feet above the sea, show themselves, in extreme distance, merely as vertical shades, with very sharp outlines, detached from one another by greater intensity, according to their nearness" (*WR*, III, p. 439). From a remote stand-point mountains appear so transparent that they almost completely lose any consistency, and give origin to an optical effect that Ruskin carefully describes: "you will never, by any chance, perceive in extreme distance anything like solid form a projection of the hills. Each is a dead, flat, perpendicular film or shade". The representation of the mountain scenery is therefore fixed at a definite distance, and from it Ruskin proceeds to treat another aspect. The edge will appear "excessively sharp", and this is then pointed out as the "unfailing characteristic of all very great distances". Once again the right distance or focus of the eye is invoked to rightly establish the outline: "It is quite a mistake to suppose that slurred or melting lines are characteristic of distant *large* objects; they may be so [...] when the focus of the eye is not adapted to them; but when the eye is really directing? To the distance, melting lines are characteristic only of that mist of vapour between us and the object, not of the removal of the object". Thus Ruskin insists on "sharpness of edge" as a characteristic of a mountain view from a distance, which he sees as pervasively rendered in all Turner's works. Throughout the mountain chapters in *Modern Painters* I Ruskin had invited his viewer to seize the universal element in the Alpine landscape. This point is reiterated by a concessive clause in which – by means of a colour metaphor of the artist's palette – he indirectly questions the foundations of his aesthetic of the particular: "we are well aware of the pain inflicted on an artist's mind by the preponderance of black, and white, and green over more available colours; but there is nevertheless, in generic Alpine scenes, a fountain of feeling yet unopened, a chord of harmony yet untouched by art" (*WR,* III, p. 449). If he is now inviting artists to approach the mountain subject differently, to seize "untouched" aspects of the generic mountain scenery, he is pointing at a mode of eschewing the clichés of sublime representation, and at the same time, of the genre of a domestic Swiss art, which commonly constituted its counterpart.

When Ruskin moves to the subject of the "Inferior Mountains" his approach shifts and his focus is again, one perceives, on the category of the particular and the specific. In this chapter Ruskin analyses Turner's vignettes for Scott's poems and prose, whose subject is the Scottish chain. The fact that Ruskin faced the mountain subject in *Modern Painters* I, starting from a careful study of Turner's vignettes on Alpine as well as Scottish sceneries should be taken into account. In fact, the treatment of the subject seems to be

strongly connected with the form and the means of representation he is ana-
lysing. In other words, his discussion is a way of rendering the visual im-
pression (the mountain scenery) in the codes ruling the means of the vignette
and of the engraving. In fact, although references to Turner's vignettes also
occur in relation to other portions of landscape in the volume – namely, "Of
Truth of Colour", "Of Truth Of Chiaroscuro", "Of Truth Of Space", "Of
Truth Of Water", "Of Truth of Vegetation" – they mainly aim to foreground
the subject, the referent, which is charged with a great power of suggestion.
And when he deals with clouds in vignette engravings (paragraphs 11, 19,
20, 21, 26, 28, 32, 34), drawing a list of the variety of luministic typologies
that Turner had represented, Ruskin is not so analytical as in his passages on
mountains. He identifies the abstracting lines of parallelism, symmetry and
convexity as the underlying features of a mountain landscape, pointing at its
"universal tendencies". Therefore, reflecting Turner's treatment, Ruskin's
description reveals that he had perceived and decoded mountains in geomet-
rical terms. It would thus seem that, whereas his treatment of some portions
of landscape in *Modern Painters* I fits within Romantic categories, he ap-
plies a neoclassical aesthetic to the representation of a mountain scenery. But
with a difference: the parallelism he perceives in landscape is more in the
eye than inscribed in landscape, as appears in his description of Turner's en-
graving of Loch Coriskin: "lines running anywhere and everywhere; none
parallel to each other, nor resembling to each other and yet the whole mass
seems to be composed with the most rigid parallelism" (*WR,* III, p. 453). The
regularity that the beholder perceives would therefore appear as an "adjust-
ment of the eye", an order made out of a multitude of lines. An order of de-
coding which is not in the Old Masters, whose lines are "laid in confusion
one above another, some paler, some brighter, some scarcely discernible, but
all alike in shape" (*WR,* III, p. 454). Therefore, if compared to Addison's
statement on symmetry, Ruskin's order is the one that the beholder, as a
skilled artist, can find, out of a number of lines. One will also notice that or-
der figures as an underlying original pattern, hidden by further modifica-
tions: "look farther" – says Ruskin to the reader – "into the modifications of
character by which nature conceals the regularity of her first plan" (*WR,* III,
p. 457). The subsequent reference to vignettes such as Turner's *Daphne and
Leucippus* and *Avalanche and Inundation* foregrounds the unity/multiplicity
relationship. Of unity Ruskin says: "[the mass of mountain] is simple, bold
(o broad?) and united as one surge of a swelling sea; it rises in an unbroken
line along the valley, and lifts its promontories with an equal slope. But it

contains in its body 1000 hills". In the latter Ruskin proceeds specularly, referring to the multiplicity of aspects that are brought back to unity:

> Though the bank is broken into promontory beyond promontory, peak above peak, each the abode of a new tempest, the arbiter of a separate desolation, divided from each other by the rushing of the snow, by the motion of the storm, by the thunder of the torrent, the mighty unison of their dark and lofty line, the brotherhood of age is preserved unbroken: and the broad valley at their feet, though measured league after league away by 1000 passages of sun and darkness, and marked with fate beyond fate of hamlet and of inhabitant, lies yet but as a straight and narrow channel, a filling furrow before the flood (*WR,* III, p. 462).

The treatment of uniformity and variety broadens. The focus is subsequently on the way details are treated in order to convey vastness of effect. At this point Ruskin introduces an optical law which he calls "horizontal distance": a law enabling the viewer/painter to have a homogeneity of vision out of a different and various number of details. Whereas in the part devoted to the central mountains Ruskin had focussed on the universal and general features of high mountain scenery, in the chapter devoted to the inferior chains, largely based on British landscape – the focus gradually shifts and lingers on details, and at the end of the chapter he will restate his principle of particularity and individuality:

> nothing is so great a sign of truth and beauty in mountain drawing as the appearance of individuality; nothing is so great a proof of real imagination and invention, as the appearance that nothing has been imagined and invented. We have to feel of every inch of mountain, that it must have existence in reality, that if we had lived near the place we should have known every crag of it, and that there must be people to whom every crevice and shadow of the picture is fraught with recollections, and coloured with associations (*WR,* III, p. 470).

Comparing the two chapters it seems that an almost specular principle rules their juxtaposition, and that the representation of the Alpine scenery must refer to laws of generality and universality, avoiding national clichés and typicalities of a picturesque kind. It is this representation that seems to be applicable to the window-pane technique, mostly, of seeing the object at a distance. The treatment of the "lower mountains" focuses, by contrast, on the specific, the domestic, and the familiar, so that it seems to be clear that Ruskin is expanding the theme and approaching the subject in a more direct way. At this stage, Ruskin pays greater attention to the depiction of the do-

mestic mountain scenery, and it seems that the former, with all its enchant-
ment, could be rather the application of his "window-pane" technique, re-
sulting in the vignette illustration. In this case it is significant that it is in the
inferior mountain section that Ruskin offers us some of the "mobile" rhetori-
cal passages, which contribute to showing the scenery as something crossed
by the viewer, where the act of seeing is now experienced in a more com-
plete way, from a walking stance, which must be familiar to the reader. Talk-
ing about Turner's *Honfleur* from *The Rivers of France* Ruskin describes the
vignette dynamically, reproducing the painter's experience that the reader
can easily repeat: "[in the *Honfleur*] we are permitted to climb up the hill
from the town, and pass far into the mist along its top, and so descend mile
after mile along the ridge to seaward, until without one break in the magnifi-
cent unity of progress, we are carried down to the uttermost horizon" (*WR,*
III, p. 467).

On the whole, Ruskin's treatment of the "lower mountains" is more direct
and appeals to the viewer's direct experience, whereas the treatment of the
central mountains, and in particular of the Alps, is based on criteria which
not only rest on eighteenth-century aesthetic canons, but also depends on a
distanced point of view, in that it considers the vignette as the "lens" through
which the Alps should be seen and decoded, in order to be translated into
painting.

Both parts, however, are based on criteria of regularity, symmetry and
parallelism, but in the latter case the element of regularity is balanced by a
number of details, and by a reference to variety and exception that upsets the
order and regularity that Ruskin tries to identify in landscape through paint-
ing. Moreover, in the inferior mountain section Ruskin defines "beauty" as
the only quality to be looked for, thus implicitly denying their sublime char-
acter. "After all, the most essential qualities of line, those on which all right
delineation of mountain character must depend, are those which are only to
be explained or illustrated by appeals to our feeling of what is beautiful"
(*WR,* III, p. 468). It is in reference to the feeling of beauty among the hills
that Ruskin points, in general terms, at an ineffable sense which defies and
eschews all sense of regularity and proportion: "There is an expression about
all the hill lines of nature, which I think I shall be able hereafter to explain;
but it is not to be reduced to line and rule, not to be measured by angles or
described by compasses, not to be chipped out by the geologist or equated by
the mathematician" (*WR,* III, p. 468). This statement adds an element of
openness to a treatment which had tended to select the elements of regular-
ity. It seems to be a corrective to what he had previously stated, adding qual-

ity of "unseizableness". He would in fact qualify that feeling as "intangible, incalculable; a thing to be felt, not understood; to be loved, not comprehended; a music to the eyes, a melody to the heart, where truth is known only by its sweetness" (*WR,* III, p. 468).

5. *The Wall Veil*

The treatment of mountains in *Modern Painters* I appears bound to the characteristics and limitations of the vignette form, and can be considered as a full study – probably the most complete one in Ruskin's whole work – of the possibilities of this means. It contains the rules to abstract the characterizing lines in landscape, by singling out patterns of regularity. Everything Ruskin says is confined within the boundaries of the image represented, which also constitutes the pattern of the actual view that Ruskin anticipates. In *Modern Painters* IV the change of attitude to mountains as a subject of representation will be dramatic. Landscape is not an object of observation from a distance, thus coinciding with a fixed stand-point, but it is a space crossed and experienced through a shifting, dynamic point of observation. Whereas in the first volume mountains were essentially a perceptual object, and man a seeing eye, in *Modern Painters* IV discourse on landscape is tackled from a variety of theoretical perspectives, starting parallel discourses, on theology, geology, as well as aesthetics, and moral philosophy. This amplification can be seen as part of that broadening of interests and fields of enquiry that had marked Ruskin's activity in the 1850s, and comprehending the social, economical, aesthetic, literary, architectural elements as conjointly involved in the problem of landscape perception and representation. His interest and aesthetic perception of mountains can be seen as one of the elements involved in this change, but also in my opinion it should be seen as a factor of change. In the first volume of the *Stones of Venice*, entitled the "the Wall Veil" (*WR,* IX, p. 85), in an only apparently apologetic tone, Ruskin registers how "the year 1849 had been spent by the writer in researches little bearing upon the subject" of gothic architecture, in that he had devoted himself mainly to mountain drawing. The relation between the two is soon clarified, when he explains that by studying "a fragment of building among the Alps may turn out to be illustrative of the key feature he wanted to develop as necessary of the *wall veil*". A description of the "wall" of the Matterhorn follows and from it Ruskin draws some architectural "laws" central to his aesthetic. This statement was made in the early 1850s, during the ten-year pause from *Modern*

Painters II to *Modern Painters* III-V, and seems to mark a sharp change of attitude towards the mountains in his writings. This has to do with Ruskin's enlargement of Alpine knowledge as a result of his intense travelling and crossing the Alps, but also we might say that when he started to perceive mountains in architectural terms, as "edifices" or "bodies" to walk through, to live within, to be looked at from different distances and stand-points, his theoretical approach changed and broadened as his interests in representational matters shifted significantly. Conceiving them in architectural terms, as buildings of nature, he faced problems of construction, and often operated a complex translation of codes, by putting, for example, the geological discourses – which were at the centre of hot controversies at the time – in architectural terms, thus engendering a complicated superimposition of planes. Lastly, while perceiving mountains in architectural terms Ruskin started to see them in their interconnection with human life, and we find mountains seen as "anthropological" determinants in the "Mountain Gloom" and "Mountain Glory" chapters of *Modern Painters*. Thus the occurrence of the term "veil" for its possible implied reference to Alberti's "velo" seems to be meaningful. In fact, it does not seem to be a coincidence that the very moment in which Ruskin starts looking at mountains as architectures he refers to the "veil", recalling the Renaissance optical tool so close in conception to his window pane. The term constitutes the connecting link between the architectural and the natural planes, and as a technical as well as a metaphorical one it seems to establish the association between architectures and mountains, "the earth's cathedrals", on an optical and representational ground which turns out to be tightly intertwined with the symbolical and metaphysical ones. With this awareness in mind we therefore see that different layers of meaning, referring to both dimness and precision, are active at the same time in the word. Referring to Alberti's *velo*, the word implies the draughtsman's attempt and possibility to grasp the wall's surface with a keen eye and great skill; referring to the represented object the "wall veil" points to what the keenest eye cannot grasp and the most faithful drawing cannot but dimly retain.