

## Modelli di creatività artistica e architettonica nelle opere di John Ruskin

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*Gli studi dedicati all'influenza esercitata da John Ruskin sull'architettura si sono incentrati prevalentemente sulla questione del Gotico, sul problema del Restauro e sulla relazione tra immagine e struttura o, più esattamente, sulla discussione per l'architettura limitato alla immagine di superficie oppure esteso agli aspetti costruttivi e, in generale, ai temi più specificamente disciplinari, a dispetto del suo non essere architetto. Meno attenzione ha ricevuto un tema che intercetta con grande lucidità e offre solida struttura teorica a un mutamento in corso nella seconda metà del XIX secolo: il modello, o meglio i diversi modelli, della creatività artistica e architettonica.*

*La figura del creatore di architettura, che in Seven Lamps of Architecture tende a coincidere con il prototipo dell'artista visionario turneriano messo a punto nei primi due volumi di Modern Painters, subisce, nell'evolversi del complesso sistema ruskiniano, mutamenti sostanziali, offrendo nuovi paradigmi immediatamente assunti nella riforma della disciplina avviata da William Morris e dal movimento Arts and Crafts ma attivi per tutto il secolo successivo e ancor oggi pienamente operanti nella cultura architettonica.*

*Il presente contributo – che è parte di una più ampia ricerca – si incentra sulla stesura di The Seven Lamps of Architecture, inizialmente concepito come parte di Modern Painters, con l'intento di analizzare come la struttura della creatività descritta da John Ruskin si modifichi nel passaggio dall'arte all'architettura, guidata da due principali figure: la personalità artistica del visionario, l'anonimo come paradigma della architettura.*



# Models of Artistic and Architectural Creativity in the Works of John Ruskin

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The studies devoted to the influence exerted by John Ruskin on architecture in his time and in the following century have focused mainly on the Gothic question, on the problem of restoration and on the relationship between image and structure or, more precisely, on the discussion concerning a Ruskinian interest in architecture limited to the surface image or extended to the constructive aspects, and, in general, to the more specifically disciplinary topics in spite of his not being an architect<sup>1</sup>. Less attention has been paid to a subject that is discussed in his work with great lucidity and offers a solid theoretical structure – with immediate operational results – for a change under way in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the model, or rather the different models, of artistic and architectural creativity. In *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, the figure of the creator of architecture tends to coincide with the prototype of the Turnerian visionary artist developed in the first two volumes of *Modern Painters*, generating decisive aporias in relation to the specific treatment that Ruskin dedicates to architecture.

1. In the endless Ruskinian bibliography – which is constantly being updated – it cannot be said that architecture has assumed a central role even if numerous studies are dedicated to the subject. Limiting ourselves to individual or collective monographic volumes, these include: BEECHING 1956; PEVSNER 1969; GARRIGAN 1973; UNRAU 1978; BLAU 1982; HARMON 1982; DALLA COSTA 1983; FORTI 1983; UNRAU 1984; LEONI 1987; BROWNELL 1988; BROOKS 1989; SWENARTON 1992; LANG 1999; *Ruskin's Venice*: 2000; UNRAU 2000; LEONI 2001; DANIELS, BRANDWOOD 2003; TUCKER 2003; KINCHIN, STIRTON 2005; HANLEY, SDEGNO 2010; SILVEIRA AMARAL 2012; KITE 2012; SPUYBROEK 2016; WHEELER 2017.

In the evolution of the complex Ruskinian system, the creator of architecture undergoes substantial changes, offering new paradigms immediately assumed in the reform of the discipline initiated by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, but active throughout the next century and still fully operational in architectural culture<sup>2</sup>.

### *Visionary, prophet, preacher*

The idea of a coexistence and of a sympathetic or conflictual relationship between vision and narrative, between image and word, is structural in Ruskinian thought and rests on a dual Hellenistic and Hebraic-Christian cultural root that Ruskin challenges – though not without religious and psychological torment – throughout his life. And if it is true that the former refers to the “ideal visibility of the cosmos”<sup>3</sup> and the latter to the Word as a vehicle for drawing on divine invisibility, on both fronts Ruskin seeks to combine vision and narrative.

For Ruskin, the value of the myth lies in its being the result of a direct, physical and sensorial vision, and of being a literal, descriptive narrative of that vision, not fictional. «For all the greatest myths have been seen, by the men who tell them, involuntarily and passively – seen by them with as great distinctness (and in some respects, though not in all, under conditions as far beyond the control of their will) as a dream sent to any of us by night when we dream clearest»<sup>4</sup>.

But it is Ruskin himself who refers the passage of *Cestus of Aglaia* now cited to a page of *Modern Painters*, among the many that exalt the visionary artist endowed with a second sight, in this case firmly linked to the Jewish-Christian tradition.

2. The following pages are part of a more extensive research in progress, and the first section – *Visionary, prophet, preacher* – is reproduced with some simplification for the purpose of understanding the sections that follow from the text: LEONI (in the process of being printed). Since these texts were the starting point for this research and with the intent to highlight the critical design of Ruskinian works in the chosen key, it was decided to refer almost exclusively to primary texts, setting aside critical literature. For a reasoned and analytical general bibliography about John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* see: RAYMOND 1893; ZABEL 1933; DOLK 1941; MILES 1942; GOETZ 1947; HOUGH 1949; HÄUSERMANN 1952; HAGSTRUM 1958; ROSEMBERG 1963; BLOOM 1969; DEARDEN 1970; BALL 1971; LANDOW 1971; HEWISON 1976; MACGREGOR 1979; MCKAY JOHNSON 1980; DE SYLVA 1981; FELLOWS 1981; HEWISON 1981; DIXON, HOLLAND 1982; FITCH 1982; HELSINGER 1982; JANIK, RHODES 1982; WENDORF 1983; DOWNES 1984; LANDOW 1985; SAWYER 1985; CAWS 1989; MORGAN 1992; DEARDEN 1994; SMITH 1995; LEONI 1998, pp. LV-CVI; WILDMAN 2004-2017; ORESTANO, FRIGERIO 2009; CASALIGGI, MARCH-RUSSELL 2012.

3. For a theoretical framework see BLUMENBERG 1981.

4. RUSKIN 1905b, XIX, p. 309. As is customary, the Ruskinian texts cited here and below refer to RUSKIN 1903-1913.

«All the great men see what they paint before they paint it, – see it in a perfectly passive manner, – cannot help seeing it if they would; whether in their mind’s eye, or in bodily fact, does not matter; very often the mental vision is, I believe, in men of imagination, clearer than the bodily one; but vision it is, of one kind or another, – the whole scene, character, or incident passing before them as in second sight, whether they will or no, and requiring them to paint it as they see it; they not daring, under the might of its presence, to alter [...] one jot or tittle of it as they write it down or paint it down; it being to them in its own kind and degree always a true vision or Apocalypse, and invariably accompanied in their hearts by a feeling correspondent to the words, – “Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are”» (*Revelations* 1:19)<sup>5</sup>.

However, for Ruskin the value of the vision, whether it is myth or contemplation of the biblical divinity, consists in its being a reflection of an image of truth, content collected through a sensory act even if often described as analogous to a dream, therefore with an extreme thinning of the materiality of sight and of the viewer’s corporeity.

What distinguishes the Ruskinian “creative” visionary – a figure developed in the first two volumes of *Modern Painters* – is his not being the author of his own truth, producer of images, and his duty not to exceed the comment of a “true” image that is offered to him through nature. His strength is manifest in the capturing of this truth in its purity, his weakness is receiving it distorted. But his task is still restitution and his expression is always predicative. The model of the visionary artist, a commentator of nature as “Word of God”, is preacher and commentator of the Bible, also “Word of God”, in an analogy of tasks and expressive structure that unites image and word, vision and narrative. Artist and preacher are both “commentators on Infinity”.

The central effort of the first two volumes of *Modern Painters* – published between 1843 and 1846 – could be described as an attempt to develop on one hand the device of revelation and the reception of a divine truth contained in nature through sight, the Ruskinian theory of theoretical imagination, on the other the founding principles of his pictorial rendering in the form of a commentary or the traits of a creative figure of a visionary artist who, however, does not produce imagined worlds but is a commentator of the natural existing world. We are at the core of Ruskinian theory of art and the implications are therefore very broad.

With respect to the specific topic discussed here, the desire to give substance and body to vision is significant. As for giving substance to vision, the will to keep it linked to a natural reality external to the visionary Ruskin is helped by the typological culture and Victorian figuralism, primarily through Thomas Carlyle but within a much broader network of references and relationships. By articulating nature in a dual dimension, physical and metaphysical, this figuralism offers a foundation for the dual nature of the Ruskinian artist, descriptor of as many facts as possible but also a seeker of rare and subtle truths hidden among things.

5. RUSKIN 1903b, V, pp. 115-116.

of work a great many leaves  
being lighter - some blanker but  
a great many also elaborate in the  
highest degree - some containing  
ten exquisite compositions on each  
side of the leaf - thus -  
each no bigger than  
this -



and with about that quantity  
work in each - but every touch of  
it inimitable, done with his  
whole soul in it. Generally  
the deeper sketches are  
written over everywhere - as in  
the example enclosed, every  
incident being noted that was  
going on at the moment of  
the sketch

Denmark Hill.  
S. C.

My dear Ward  
Don't come out this  
evening, or Monday.  
- Please do me next the



of the Italy  
Love truly yours,  
M.  
The birds are lovely.

The figuralism also aids Ruskin with respect to another difficulty inherent in the model of artistic creativity with which he inextricably unites and links the imaginary world and reality, i.e. the change of things over time and the danger that temporality can represent in relation to the conception of a “text” of Nature taken as an immutable truth to be commented on.

In its “penetrative” component the imagination is descriptive, «a beholder of things, as they are», while, in its creative action, it transforms the artist into an «eminent beholder of things when and where they are not; a seer, that is, in the prophetic sense, calling “the things that are not as though they were”, and forever delighting to dwell on that which is not tangibly present»<sup>6</sup>.

In his creative action, the imaginative artist of *Modern Painters* recalls the past and the future of things to their present, “sees” the past and the future in the real present according to the temporal triplicity of the figuralist approach we have mentioned.

It is on the basis of this figuralist approach that Ruskin, close to the completion of the first two volumes of *Modern Painters*, would be able to combine in a single system of creativity the apparently opposite outcomes of Pre-Raphaelite magical realism and visionary Turnerism.

At one extreme the “historical” artist, the Pre-Raphaelite, who observes and patiently “recounts” nature in every detail, returning the fullness of truth, and at the opposite extreme Turner distilling synthetic images capable of restoring essential truths that are less evident but no less real, no less founded on direct and timely observation. Between the Pre-Raphaelite “historical narrative” that does not omit any detail observed in nature and the synthetic view of Turnerism, which apparently abandons the direct narration of things observed in favour of an original image, there is neither comparison nor contrast because they are not different imaginary worlds, but rather both are possible comments from the same text, the nature. The “historical” narrative task of the Pre-Raphaelite is to accurately transcribe the appearance of things to passively transmit the potential for vision, sacrificing personal interpretation. The task of the Turnerian vision consists in getting rid of the description – which remains the matrix of the new images but is confined to a preliminary creative phase of study – not to invent different worlds but to “glorify” the same truth, rendering its subtle divine attributes more evident<sup>7</sup>.

And it is in correspondence with the effort to show the non-contradiction between the predicative attitude of the Pre-Raphaelites and Turner’s visionary intuition that Ruskin clearly brings out the figure

6. *Ivi*, p. 181. The biblical references to which Ruskin refers in a note to the passage are 1 *Corinthians* 1:28: «And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are» and the already mentioned *Revelations* 1:19: «Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter».

7. RUSKIN 1904a, XII, pp. 318-335; *Ivi*, XII, pp. 336-361.

of Christ as a model of creativity, literally offering a body to view. The reference becomes explicit and shows all its complexity in the analysis of Holman Hunt's painting entitled *The light of the world*. Thanks to his dual human and divine nature, Christ guarantees man the possibility of showing what is human in the way that he appears, but with his divine potential and also practising vision, showing what is not as it might be, but avoiding the all-too-human risk of idolatry, i.e. of a vision that glorifies itself and the visionary, and not the nature in which it was received.

«Now, when Christ enters any human heart, he bears with him a twofold light: first, the light of conscience, which displays past sin, and afterwards the light of peace, the hope of salvation. The lantern, carried in Christ's left hand, is this light of conscience. Its fire is red and fierce; it falls only on the closed door, on the weeds which encumber it, and on an apple shaken from one of the trees of the orchard, thus marking that the entire awakening of the conscience is not merely to committed, but to hereditary guilt. The light is suspended by a chain, wrapt about the wrist of the figure, showing that the light which reveals sin appears to the sinner also to chain the hand of Christ. The light which proceeds from the head of the figure, on the contrary, is that of the hope of salvation; it springs from the crown of thorns, and, though itself sad, subdued, and full of softness, is yet so powerful that it entirely melts into the glow of it the forms of the leaves and boughs, which it crosses, showing that every earthly object must be hidden by this light, where its sphere extends»<sup>8</sup>.

But Christ is also the figure that unifies the dual root because not only does he bring light in his own person – the twofold light – but he also brings the word. He approaches the house of man with a triple role, “prophet, priest and king”<sup>9</sup>. Priest and king, because his image shows the attributes, but also a prophet because upon hearing his voice the house, the “heart” of men, as Ruskin writes, opens up to welcome his dual nature. «The legend beneath it is the beautiful verse – “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me”» (*Revelations 3: 20*)<sup>10</sup>.

Christ thus embodies and surpasses the various figures – intertwining and alternating in taking over each other – that orient the model of creativity developed by Ruskin in *Modern Painters*: the visionary, who “hides the earthly objects”, the prophet who, by explaining the vision, announces the divine to men – “the faults of the past and the hope of salvation” – and the preacher, who simply narrates things as they are, who sits at the table of the man and shares his daily life as a testimony to his own humanity.

8. RUSKIN 1904a, XII, pp. 329-330.

9. «Christ approaches it in the night-time, Christ, in his everlasting offices of prophet, priest, and king. He wears the white robe, representing the power of the Spirit upon him; the jewelled robe and breastplate, representing the sacerdotal investiture; the rayed crown of gold, inwoven with the crown of thorns; not dead thorns, but now bearing soft leaves, for the healing of the nations». *Ivi*, p. 329.

10. *Ibidem*.

If we go to the end of the fifth and last volume without forgetting that ten years pass between the second and third – 1846-1856 – dedicated primarily to architecture, we can observe how *Modern Painters* closes with an image that addresses the subtle balance between human condition and divine condition in the clearest and most poetic form. It does so almost with the tone of a melancholy acknowledgement of the impracticability of the visionary artist model from whose definition the work had begun. It is the image of man as “dark mirror”<sup>11</sup>, not a vehicle for the potentially faithful revelation of divine characters – the visionary artist profiled in the first two volumes – but rather a “dark mirror” of divinity, a vehicle that can certainly reveal to us as much of the divine that we can recognise in nature, but obscurely, in a distorted and fragmented form.

How does this revelation occur, Ruskin asks in those pages, inevitably returning to the topic we started with, i.e. to the relationship between narration and vision: does it occur through sight or through words? There is no difference. If it is a revelation through images, the eyes of man must see them correctly<sup>12</sup>. If the revelation arrives through words, similarly we can only receive it by looking in the “dark mirror” of the human.

«But this poor miserable Me! Is this, then, all the book I have got to read about God in?” Yes, truly so. No other book, nor fragment of book, than that, will you ever find [...] That flesh-bound volume is the only revelation that is, that was, or that can be. In that is the image of God painted; in that is the law of God written; in that is the promise of God revealed. Know thyself; for through thyself only thou canst know God. (I *Corinthians* 13:12 in the note) Through the glass, darkly. But, except through the glass, in nowise. A tremulous crystal, waved as water, poured out upon the ground; – you may defile it, despise it, pollute it, at your pleasure and at your peril; for on the peace of those weak waves must all the heaven you shall ever gain be first seen; and through such purity as you can win for those dark waves, must all the light of the risen Sun of Righteousness be bent down, by faint refraction. Cleanse them, and calm them, as you love your life. Therefore it is that all the power of nature depends on subjection to the human soul. Man is the sun of the world; more than the real sun. The fire of his wonderful heart is the only light and heat worth gauge or measure. Where he is, are the tropics; where he is not, the ice-world»<sup>13</sup>.

“No other book or book fragment”. It is a strong expression, a decisive and radical passage if one considers the centrality of the Bible as a model of truth in the Ruskinian work and if one considers

11. RUSKIN 1903b, VII, p. 253 and following.

12. «So far, then, as your sight is just, it is the image of God’s sight. If by words, - how do you know their meanings? Here is a short piece of precious word revelation, for instance. “God is love” (I *John*, IV:16 in the note). Love! yes. But what is *that*? The revelation does not tell you that, I think. Look into the mirror, and you will see. Out of your own heart, you may know what love is. In no other possible way, – by no other help or sign». *Ivi*, pp. 260-261.

13. *Ivi*, pp. 261-262. «There are, indeed, the two states of this image – the earthly and heavenly, but both Adamite, both human, both the same likeness; only one defiled, and one pure. So that the soul of man is still a mirror, wherein may be seen, darkly, the image of the mind of God» (I *Corinthians*, 13:12 in the note). *Ivi*, p. 260.

how that model conditions its conception of nature – and specifically of natural truth – in the first two volumes of the work, making external truth the sure guide of artistic action. Having arrived at the border between the initial project of *Modern Painters* and the decade of architectural studies, the only revelation is the “book bound in flesh”, the body of a man who is no longer the visionary, the artist who despite his extreme strength is «conquered, and brought into the inaccurate and vague state of perception, so that the language of the highest inspiration becomes broken, obscure, and wild in metaphor»<sup>14</sup>. He is no longer even the prophet able to recount such a vision received in purity in a direct relationship with the divinity and that has the highest duty of telling things “where” and “when” they are not, just maintaining an extraordinary condition compared to the common man. The artist becomes a “preacher” of things as they are, of their human nature because they are known through the human body, as much as their being a witness of divine and super-human truth.

With regard to the task of defining a visionary capacity that does not eliminate the viewing body and the physical existence of the seen object while retaining the faculty to access supernatural truths – which in other words we could define as an imagination that does not invent worlds but rather discovers potential new ones, potentially infinite, in one that is existing and external to the imagining party – the Christological references become decisive in Ruskin’s work. Moreover, remaining with the topics of the models of creativity that he develops in the field of art and architecture, they certainly help to define a creative figure that, we could hazard, dominates at least the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in both fields, founding on the ostension of oneself as “sacrificed” an assumption of artisticity of one’s own behaviour that allows the absence of rules and canons, on the one hand neutralising aesthetic judgements and on the other, consequently, opening the way to the possibility of including all existing matter within the scope of artistic expression<sup>15</sup>.

### *Visionary architect and happy craftsman*

Ruskin leaves no doubt about the continuity between the first two volumes of *Modern Painters* and *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, writing in the preface to the first edition of *Lamps* in 1849 that the reflections that inspired the work were collected during the preparation of the third the volume of *Painters*, also in the hypothesis of including the reflection on architecture in the opus magnum<sup>16</sup>.

14. RUSKIN 1903b, V, p. 209.

15. ELIADE 1943.

16. RUSKIN 1903c, VIII, p. 3. More obscure the reasons why the third volume of *Modern Painters* was not started, which in fact, as mentioned, would have to wait for eight years.



Figure 3. John Ruskin, *Villa Serbelloni, Bellagio* (from J. RUSKIN, *The Poetry of Architecture, Cottage, Villa, etc*, John Wiley and Sons, New York 1888, p. 92).

Architecture, we still read in the preface to the second edition (1855), is none other than “association” in “noble volumes” and collocation “in opportune places” of painting and sculpture<sup>17</sup>. We are not far from the positions of the earlier *Poetry of Architecture*, a work in which Ruskin, not yet 20 years old and using the pseudonym Kata Phusin, dealt with the culture of the picturesque<sup>18</sup>.

Moreover on several occasions Ruskin insists on giving value especially to the illustrative tables of *Lamps* – perfected between first and second edition – that is to say, a work that he considers “visual” in nature and that, in the preface to the 1880 edition, declares to be «the most useless that I have ever written» because the buildings described “with so much joy” were then destroyed or, much more tragically, restored<sup>19</sup>. But the later decision to detach the discussion of architecture from the treatise

17. *Ivi*, p. 11.

18. RUSKIN 1903a, I, pp. 1-187.

19. RUSKIN 1903c, VIII, p. 15.

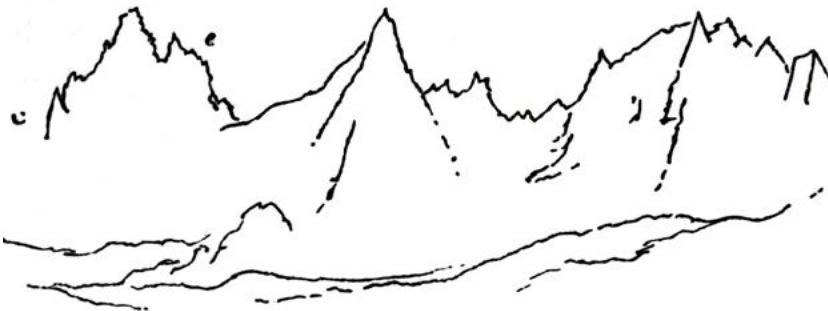
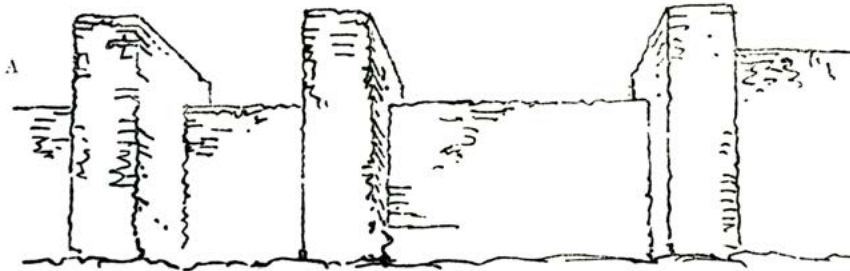


Figure 4. John Ruskin, *Aiguilles*  
(from J. RUSKIN, *Modern  
Painters*, G. Allen, Sunnyside,  
Orpingtonm London 1898, IV,  
p. 192).

on art derives from a series of aporias that the creative model of the visionary and prophetic artist poses when Ruskin applies it to architecture and, as we shall see, from opportunities that the figure of Christ the preacher who says “in the Lord”, therefore redeeming them, things (“base” and “despised”) as they are offers to the creative process of architecture.

Handwritten notes relating to the development of *Lamps* show us the usual Ruskinian difficulty in respecting the systematic structures of thought that he himself tries to impose on himself. In particular, his difficulty in remaining within the fixed number of seven guiding lights of the discipline as well as clearly distinguishing the categories to which they must refer and which are still strongly influenced by *Modern Painters'* theoretical construct, a work no less marked by constant tension between the desire for systematic criticism and, sometimes uncontrolled narrative energies<sup>20</sup>. Also in consideration of this, the topics of our study, rather than pursuing philologies that the Ruskinian procedure itself makes inoperative, can be traced back to three that mark the fracture between a discussion of art and a discussion of architecture, allowing Ruskin to define new identities of the creative. The three subjects are: ugliness, obedience and memory.

For Ruskin, who is concluding the first two volumes of *Modern Painters*, the subject of ugliness is inevitably connected to the question of truth that arises in architecture in an entirely new form on the basis of a simple consideration deriving from the distinction between architecture and sculpture. This is less obvious and more subtle than the distinction between painting and architecture, for which «sculpture is the representation of an idea, while architecture is itself a real thing»<sup>21</sup>.

Architecture therefore is one thing, and as such inevitably loses the predicative structure that Ruskin had placed at the base of his “reform” of painting that he had elaborated up to that moment in *Modern Painters*. Since the predicative structure of the pictorial image as a commentary of nature lacks in architecture, the interchangeability between vision and narrative with which Ruskin had supported the figure of the visionary and prophetic artist by combining the Greek and Jewish-Christian dual root is missing. In fact he returns to the subject in the *Seven Lamps*, in the chapter *Lamp of Truth*, writing that the world of the imagination is not misleading («an endaeavour to deceive»), it is not “madness”, because it «confesses its own ideality» and «all the difference lies in the fact of the confession» so that the imaginative artist performs «a communicated act of imagination but not a lie. The lie can consist only in an *assertion* of its existence [...] or else in false statements of forms and colours»<sup>22</sup>.

20. *Ivi*, p. 138, pp. 278-279.

21. *Ivi*, p. 176.

22. RUSKIN 1903c, VIII, pp. 58-59.

It is the “confession” of the imaginative act as predicate and not as primary truth that, recognising the status of truth to nature as text, “word of God”, allows the permeability between vision and narration described above, which in fact is noted in *Seven Lamps*.

«For instance: I desire to give an account of a mountain or of a rock; I begin by telling its shape. But words will not do this distinctly, and I draw its shape and say, “This was its shape.” Next: I would fain represent its colour: but words will not do this either, and I dye the paper, and say, “This was its colour”»<sup>23</sup>.

The principle of coincidence between truth and beauty therefore fails in architecture and Ruskin must apply the system developed in *Modern Painters* to a discipline whose structure is affirmative and not predicative. In the perspective of our treatment this means, first of all, the need to abandon the creative structure of the visionary prophet or the artist who says things as they are not and when they are not, and with it the possibility of seamlessly alternating a precise narration able to maintain its potential for revelation, and a more subtle vision of truth which nevertheless still contains, in power, all the narrative of the natural world.

Architecture “says” the things that are, here and now, and in this his ποιήσις – we will see in closing how Ruskin retrieves the root of saying things that is also doing – is not only missing the term of comparison of natural truth but it is liable to a different «less subtle, more contemptible, violation of truth [...] a direct falsity of assertion respecting the nature of material, or the quantity of labour»<sup>24</sup>. He who says-produces things as they are cannot therefore be the artist preacher, visionary and prophet of *Modern Painters*, and passing on to the topic of obedience we will see how Ruskin redefines the truthfulness and legitimacy of his work. But it remains to be clarified that based on the considerations heretofore presented Ruskin does not hesitate to define architecture as having no beauty and this for two distinct reasons. The first is that, as mentioned, it is not an imitative art and cannot therefore draw from the source of truth-beauty that is nature. It can show aspects of beauty where it shows aspects imitated by nature, a curvature, the sculpture of a natural element, but in itself it cannot express beauty.

«Man cannot advance in the invention of beauty, without directly imitating natural form. Thus, in the Doric temple the triglyph and cornice are unimitative; or imitative only of artificial cuttings of wood. No one would call these members beautiful [...] Again: the Doric capital was unimitative; but all the beauty it had was dependent on the precision of its ovolo, a natural curve of the most frequent occurrence»<sup>25</sup>.

23. *Ibidem*.

24. *Ibidem*.

25. RUSKIN 1903c, VIII, pp. 139-140.

The visible beauty of natural forms, or taken from nature, is therefore an accessory element of architecture, in some ways also harmful, and this consideration is the basis for the Ruskinian critique of decoration intended as a superficial dressing of the architectural body.

«For there are many forms of so called decoration in architecture, habitual, and received, therefore, with approval, or at all events without any venture at expression of dislike, which I have no hesitation in asserting to be not ornament at all, but to be ugly things, the expense of which ought in truth to be set down in the architect's contract, as "For Monstrification»<sup>26</sup>.

But the Ruskinian critique of sculptural beauty taken from nature and inserted into architecture goes further.

«The question is first to be clearly determined whether the architecture is a frame for the sculpture, or the sculpture an ornament of the architecture. If the latter, then the first office of that sculpture is not to represent the things it imitates, but to gather out of them those arrangements of form which shall be pleasing to the eye in their intended places. So soon as agreeable lines and points of shade have been added to the mouldings which were meagre, or to the lights which were unrelieved, the architectural work of the imitation is accomplished; and how far it shall be wrought towards completeness or not, will depend upon its place, and upon other various circumstance»<sup>27</sup>.

Sculptural decoration that becomes part of architecture responds to principles that are no longer those of imitative art and, while imitating nature, must be subject to a dual principle of obedience. On the one hand the imitative reference to visible characteristics of nature, obedience to the divine, on the other the principle of collocation in the work of architecture, its composition, obedience to the human who consents to – indeed requires – adaptations and transgressions to the principles of imitative art.

«Nothing can be less symmetrical than the group of leaves which joins the two columns in Plate XIII.; yet, since nothing of the leaf character is given but what is necessary for the bare suggestion of its image and the attainment of the lines desired, their treatment is highly abstract. It shows that the workman only wanted so much of the leaf as he supposed good for his architecture, and would allow no more; and how much is to be supposed good, depends, as I have said, much more on place and circumstance than on general laws»<sup>28</sup>.

We are at a point of great tension in the transition between art discourse and architecture discourse. Sculptural perfection can be part of architecture, writes Ruskin, but the risk is that the perfection of the sculpture transforms the architecture into a mere frame for the sculpture, and this must not happen.

26. *Ivi*, p. 141.

27. *Ivi*, pp. 170-171.

28. *Ibidem*.

«A perfection – the least of all perfections, and yet the crowning one of all – one which by itself, and regarded in itself, is an architectural coxcombry but is yet the sign of the most highly-trained mind and power when it is associated with others. It is a safe manner, as I think, to design all things at first in severe abstraction, and to be prepared<sup>29</sup>, if need were, to carry them out in that form; then to mark the parts where high finish would be admissible, to complete these always with stern reference to their general effect, and then connect them by a graduated scale of abstraction with the rest»<sup>30</sup>.

It is exactly this truth composed of different and contradictory “perfections” that, as we shall see, Ruskin will recognise in Venice, a city that will open up the creative dimension of the anonymous to him and that will definitively remove it from the visibilistic reading of architecture<sup>31</sup>. And even if we address the specific subject elsewhere, the relevance of this change in Ruskin’s positions with respect to restoration in relation to the dialectic between the body and image of architecture is worth pointing out.

As the quotation clarifies, the task of producing the various sculptural perfections/imperfections that “breathe life” – literally, for Ruskin, as we shall see – into architecture is not up to the architect but to the workman, who therefore has two guides for his work, in a certain manner being both human and divine and therefore embodying in architecture that figure of creativity having a Christological matrix that we have already seen appear with respect to painting as transcending the figure of the visionary and prophetic artist. His task is the work, the all-human task of saying/producing things, the «base things of the world» (I *Corinthians* 1:28, see above), but “telling them in the Lord”, which transforms the work of the workman into a “happy work”<sup>32</sup>.

Addressing the topic of obedience will clarify the relevance of this figure of architecture as “happy work”, but Ruskin, in the *Seven Lamps*, seeks a way to also introduce the subject of inspired vision into his thinking on architecture, proposing a dual nature of the creative that would generate, through Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, an immediate and decisive reform of the discipline. This reform would then cross the 20<sup>th</sup> century unravelling among multiform antinomic couples – artist/craftsman, visionary/problem solver, architect/restorer – all inscribed in the dialectic between personality and anonymity, between architecture as an individual expression and architecture as a collective production.

Even the effort to define the visionary component of architecture is, in the *Seven Lamps*, made complex by a terminological restlessness that leads Ruskin to experiment with different expressions,

29. Here the editors of the Library Edition appropriately refer to RUSKIN 1903d, IX, p. 288 and following.

30. RUSKIN 1903c, VIII, p. 175.

31. The critique of perfection is also the foundation of Ruskin’s criticism of the Renaissance, a topic that we do not deal with here.

32. RUSKIN 1903c, VIII, p. 218.

all challenging for a “neophyte” in the discipline: “symmetry”, “proportion”, “order” are the main ones, all used in an obviously anti-academic manner strongly opposed to any canonical rule with a not simple interweaving of overlapping meanings. What must be stressed here, however, is Ruskin’s insistent focus on a process that characterizes architecture and architecture alone, i.e. a process of “abstraction”.

Questioning the specific nature of architectural ornamentation, taking into account only the limited imitative component of architecture, considering that ornamentation cannot be a superficial decoration but must be a characteristic of architecture without distinction between appearance and substance, in what way can an architect “decorate” architecture?

«Those qualities which alone he can secure are certain severe characters of form, such as men only see in nature on deliberate examination, and by the full and set appliance of sight and thought: a man must lie down on the bank of grass on his breast and set himself to watch and penetrate the intertwining of it, before he finds that which is good to be gathered by the architect. So then while Nature is at all times pleasant to us, and while the sight and sense of her work may mingle happily with all our thoughts, and labours, and times of existence, that image of her which the architect carries away represents what we can only perceive in her by direct intellectual exertion, and demands from us, wherever it appears, an intellectual exertion of a similar kind in order to understand it and feel it. It is the written or sealed impression of a thing sought out, it is the shaped result of inquiry and bodily expression of thought»<sup>33</sup>.

The “sublime” component of architecture, its direct, inspired connection with the divine order, does not rest (as it did for beautiful/sublime painting in *Modern Painters*) on a sensory and visual act – “sight and sense” – thanks to which natural beauty could happily mix «with all our thoughts, and labours, and times of existence», leaving the painter the freedom to recompose the “typical” truth into infinitely differentiable comments – from wildly visionary to humbly descriptive – but always firmly grounded in a truthful “text” that can be shared with every man, even a non-artist.

The “intellectual exertion” of the inspired architect (no longer a happy vision) is an operation of understanding of a strictly human nature aimed at grasping the essential order of nature in order not to imitate it but rather to support it with an act of production that must not contrast with the order included but that cannot use it as a guide.

Thus follows the need to redefine the foundation of an ornamental act that consists not in the beautification of a construction but in conceiving an order of matter different from that which nature offers and that does not contrast with it<sup>34</sup>. Architectural inspiration therefore consists in grasping a potential energy inherent in matter and bringing it to completion.

33. *Ivi*, p. 155.

34. On the relationship between “Order” and ποίησις, framed in a system of cultural references very similar to Ruskin, see COOMARASWAMY 1939, pp. 375-382.

«Architecture, which being properly capable of no other life than this, and being not essentially composed of things pleasant in themselves depend, for their dignity and pleasurable-ness in the utmost degree, upon the vivid expression of the intellectual life which has been concerned in their production»<sup>35</sup>.

The creator of architecture therefore has two distinct identities in the *Seven Lamps*. On the one hand the identity of an intellectual, not an artist but an inspired architect whose faculty consists in knowing how to arrange matter with order having grasped the abstract structure of the existing and its potential energy. On the other hand there is the identity of a craftsman, also not an artist, whose task consists in the poietic act that finally makes visible the architectural ornament itself or the harmonious blending of the divine order and the human order the constructed work bears witness to. It is about this, therefore, that architecture can and must not lie: on the one hand the order of matter composed through an intellectual and abstract action, and on the other the quantity of work, the “power of manipulation” visibly employed in the production. The two figures both contribute in different manners to the “vitality” that, guided by the “lamp of life”, man can instil in architecture.

«His true life is like that of lower organic beings, the independent force by which he moulds and governs external things; it is a force of assimilation which converts everything around him into food, or into instruments; and which, however humbly or obediently it may listen to or follow the guidance of superior intelligence, never forfeits its own authority as a judging principle, as a will capable either of obeying or rebelling»<sup>36</sup>.

The poietic capacity of man, the authoritativeness that allows him – even if guided by superior intelligence – to exercise his own totally human judgement on matter generates a “Living Architecture”, i.e. an architecture devoid of canons and fixed rules that marks Ruskin’s radical transcending of any stylistic historical research in favour of a free composition with infinite variability. «Now I call that Living Architecture. There is sensation in every inch of it, and an accommodation to every architectural necessity, with a determined variation in arrangement, which is exactly like the related proportions and provisions in the structure of organic form»<sup>37</sup>.

The inappropriateness of applying the architectural ornament thus understood to what is connected with practical life, the appeal to the uselessness of architecture – the most cited and worst interpreted position in Ruskinian architectural thought – and the polemic against luxury are all minor articulations of the central theme that leads us to the second key term in the transition between art and architecture, i.e. obedience.

35. RUSKIN 1903c, VIII, pp. 190-191.

36. *Ivi*, p. 192.

37. *Ivi*, p. 204.

The *Lamp of Sacrifice* with which Ruskin opens *Seven Lamps* is a tormented and, in many ways, obscure chapter, but at the same time it is the heart of the transition between model of artistic creativity and model of architectural creativity as it is focused on a key idea for both.

The complexity and the torment that marks the pages on sacrifice derive from the complex position that Ruskin assumes towards the Oxford movement and the recovery of Catholic-Roman ritualism. But more in general they reflect the difficulty – biographical more than intellectual – of deciding between the severity of the Anglican church, by which he was rigidly educated, and the figurative wealth of the Roman church, to which he is artistically drawn.

The need to marry image and word, figuration and narrative, with respect to architecture becomes the question of the relationship between symbol and rite, and marks the Ruskinian indecision between the visibilistic conception of architecture, with reference to the beauty of artistic nature on the one hand, and, on the other, the appreciation of its specificity as a human poietic act. This is evidenced by the first paragraph of the first chapter of *Seven Lamps* which has two versions, both included in the Library Edition:

«Architecture is the art which so disposes and adorns the edifices raised by man, for whatsoever uses, that the sight of them may contribute to his mental health, power, and pleasure.

Architecture is that art which taking up, and admitting as conditions of her working, the necessities and uses of the building, makes it also agreeable to the eye, or venerable, or honourable by the addition of certain useless characters»<sup>38</sup>.

While the version chosen for publication is the first, which, as recalled above, still recalls the picturesque arrays of Ruskinian thought on architecture, the subsequent text reveals the reversal that the unpublished version had already manifested. The value of architecture derives from adding to the work done for the necessity and use of the building, characteristics of uselessness.

The topic that Ruskin proposes, accompanied by appropriate scriptural references, is the possibility in modern times to conceive of architecture as an act of offering to God. Ruskin makes it clear that it is not a matter of confining the question to ecclesiastical architecture and that it is not a matter of subjecting architecture to “moral purpose”: «It is not the result of labour in any sort of which we are speaking, but the bare and mere costliness – the substance and labour and time themselves: are these, we ask, independently of their result, acceptable offerings to God, and considered by Him as doing Him honour»<sup>39</sup>.

38. *Ivi*, p. 27.

39. *Ivi*, p. 32.

So if the pages on sacrifice in *Seven Lamps* are strongly marked – as notes and variations of the different editions show – by the debate on the dangers of idolatry linked to the recovery of ritualism in the Protestant church and by the tormented position taken by Ruskin with respect to the development of our reasoning, what unquestionably appears in these pages is the transcending of the centrality of the image in favour of the poietic and productive structure of architecture: «It is not the church we want, but the sacrifice; not the emotion of admiration, but the act of adoration; not the gift, but the giving»<sup>40</sup>.

Sacrifice does not consist in the offering of an image – in Ruskinian thought structurally linked to a divine matrix, as we have seen – but in the offer of human work by providing an «increase of apparent labour as an increase of beauty in the building»<sup>41</sup>. An increase, specifies Ruskin, that does not mean maximum expenditure of labour energy in a competitive form but that is instead an explicit invitation to restrain the constructive action, to simplify it, to suspend it if necessary, even allowing the imperfection of the human work to emerge, to let emerge the quality of the built matter itself. This because the specific value of architecture is, as mentioned, «the value of the appearance of labour»<sup>42</sup>, an evidence of human work applied to matter.

The harmonising of man’s constructive action and built matter, modelled on the sacrificial act or on the offer of work not performed in a spirit of utility for man but as an act of ornamentation or a gratuitous offering to God, is also at the base of another key concept that appears in the *Seven Lamps* and that represents a transition between the model of artistic creativity and the model of architectural creativity: «God is one and the same, and is pleased or displeased by the same things for ever, although one part of His pleasure may be expressed at one time rather than another, and although the mode in which His pleasure is to be consulted may be by Him graciously modified to the circumstances of men»<sup>43</sup>.

The direct link between artist and deity through nature, supported by the sacrificial vision that is the key to establishing a direct relationship between human work and divinity, brings the idea of supra-temporal constants that underlie the circumstantial resolutions that man articulates over time to architecture. But while the task of the visionary artist was, in its maximum result, the instantaneous and timely disclosure of a truth as close as possible to full divine truth, disclosure that required or at

40. *Ivi*, pp. 39-140.

41. *Ivi*, p. 113. «The masonry of a building is to be shown».

42. *Ivi*, p. 46.

43. *Ivi*, pp. 32-33. The reference to Plato’s *Laws*, included here, is on p. 27 in a note to the aforementioned definition of openness, and more precisely to the distinction between “architecture” and “building”.

least better expressed itself with an image, architecture, drawing its primary value from the poietic act, does not have the possibility to draw on the “typical” truths of divinity, presenting them in purity. It can only lead one’s own progress, human and therefore circumstantial, to a bond of legality with divinity witnessed by constants that reappear, a bond that cannot have a figurative form but only a written expression.

For this reason the primary biblical reference for *Lamp of Sacrifice* – and perhaps for *Seven Lamps* as a whole – is Leviticus, and yet from the first page the reference to Plato’s *Laws* also appears, in a note, a text that Ruskin approaches precisely in these years and that offers another decisive model for a legality of architectural making based not on the figure but on the word, a model of intellectual and not visual dominion, so the term “architecture” can be used implying “authority over materials”<sup>44</sup>. “Dominion” or “government” over matter, coinciding with the faculty of abstraction mentioned above<sup>45</sup>, is therefore the form that the direct link with divinity assumes in architecture. But in its visible form, far removed from its essence by seeking to give an image to divine perfection, architecture must instead maintain an evident trace of a «measure of darkness as great as there is in human life»<sup>46</sup>. As mentioned above, according to the conclusion of *Modern Painters* man is simply a “dark mirror” of divinity and therefore:

«as the great poem and great fiction generally affect us most by the majesty of their masses of shade, and cannot take hold upon us if they affect a continuance of lyric sprightliness, but must be often serious, and sometimes melancholy, else they do not express the truth of this wild world of ours; so there must be, in this magnificently human art of architecture, some equivalent expression for the trouble and wrath of life, for its sorrow and its mystery»<sup>47</sup>.

A narrative, therefore, that introduces in the abstraction of architecture as a disposition of matter, as a “government” of matter, the events of human imperfection and fragility, a “measure of darkness” as Ruskin defines it.

The result is a strong appeal by Ruskin to the experiential dimension of architecture that must also be brought into the project, a reference to its corporeity and the corporeity of the man who in the

44. *Ivi*, p. 68. Library Edition’s editors give in note the reference to Plato: «For if a man were born so divinely gifted that he could naturally apprehend the truth, he would have no need of laws to rule over him; for there is no law or order which is above knowledge, nor can mind, without impiety, be deemed the subject or slave of any man, but rather the lord of all. I speak of mind, true and free, and in harmony with nature. But then there is no such mind anywhere, or at least not much; and therefore we must choose law and order, which are second best. These look at things as they exist for the most part only, and are unable to survey the whole of them» (*Laws*, IX, 875D, Benjamin Jowett translation).

45. *Ivi*, p. 138.

46. *Ivi*, pp. 116-117.

47. *Ibidem*.

*Seven Lamps* is intertwined with the visibilistic conception that Ruskin starts from, creating ambiguity but also definitively overcoming its purely figurative structure.

«And among the first habits that a young architect should learn, is that of thinking in shadow, not looking at a design in its miserable liny skeleton; but conceiving it as it will be when the dawn lights it, and the dusk leaves it; when its stones will be hot, and its crannies cool; when the lizards will bask on the one, and the birds build in the other. Let him design [...] with the sense of cold and heat upon him; let him cut out the shadows, as men dig wells in unwatered plains; and lead along the lights, as a founder does his hot metal; let him keep the full command of both, and see that he knows how they fall, and where they fade. His paper lines and proportions are of no value: all that he has to do must be done by spaces of light and darkness; and his business is to see that the one is broad and bold enough not to be swallowed up by twilight, and the other deep enough not to be dried like a shallow pool by a noon-day sun»<sup>48</sup>.

Moreover, Ruskin emphasises that there is no difference between the Levitical sacrifice and the sacrifice of Christ since he did not come to destroy the law but rather to fulfil it<sup>49</sup>, and the Levitical sacrifice does not derive its value from the purity of the sacrificed.

«The spotlessness of the sacrifice renders it more expressive to the Christian mind; but was it because so expressive that it was actually, and in so many words, demanded by God? Not at all. It was demanded by Him expressly on the same grounds on which an earthly governour would demand it, as a testimony of respect. “Offer it now unto thy governour”» (*Mal.* 1:8 in the note)<sup>50</sup>.

Taking into account the use of biblical scriptures as a guiding text for Ruskinian thought, it is certainly not a coincidence that the scriptural reference to Malachi evokes the offering of a blind animal.

Two figures emerge as a guide for architecture. On the one hand, there is a law that governs the legitimacy of the dominion that man exercises over matter “on the same grounds” of an “earthly governour” by modifying it, Law that corresponds to the figure of an intellectual architect who guides the architectural invention. On the other hand there is the “narrative” of human effort that produces architecture, visible in the work, happy if legitimate, of a workman who is guided by the intellectual architect but who has his own autonomy in bearing witness to the “measure of darkness”, human fragility and limitations of the work, the imperfection required to prevent the work itself from becoming a challenge to divine perfection. In short, the ugliness, we might say, that makes architecture legitimate and does not transform it into sculpture, which is an artist’s work.

Two figures of obedience, therefore, a topic that leads Ruskin to translate one of the foundational characteristics of the visionary artist into an architectural key, i.e. his renunciation of personality as a

48. *Ibidem*.

49. RUSKIN 1903c, VIII, p. 32.

50. *Ivi*, p. 34.

trusted companion for the revelation of external and absolute truths to be recomposed imaginatively – by penetrative or associative means – in his own art, and precisely for this reason visionary.

In this case as well the shifting between the two models of creativity is subtle, as Ruskin made many attempts at unification, even radical. Like the artist, the creator of architecture must renounce his personality, but the force that pushes him to such renunciation is not the model of divine perfection and its multiform natural manifestations, but rather the collective and impersonal dimension, and all inscribed in the scope of the human, of architecture.

«So also in estimating the dignity of any action or occupation of men, there is perhaps no better test than the question “are its laws strait?” For their severity will probably be commensurate with the greatness of the numbers whose labour it concentrates or whose interest it concerns.

This severity must be singular, therefore, in the case of that art, above all others, whose productions are the most vast and the most common; which requires for its practice the co-operation of bodies of men, and for its perfection the perseverance of successive generations. And, taking into account also what we have before so often observed of Architecture, her continual influence over the emotions of daily life, and her realism, as opposed to the two sister arts which are in comparison but the picturing of stories and of dreams, we might beforehand expect that we should find her healthy state and action dependent on far more severe laws than theirs: that the license which they extend to the workings of individual mind would be withdrawn by her; and that, in assertion of the relations which she holds with all that is universally important to man, she would set forth, by her own majestic subjection, some likeness of that on which man’s social happiness and power depend»<sup>51</sup>.

Subject to these human constraints – «the co-operation of bodies of men», the refinement and durability in subsequent generations, the «influence over the emotions of daily life», its “realism” – architecture offers no opportunity for individual expression. Given the same dispersion of the artist’s personality but in a totally human multiformity, it does not allow the synthesis that reconstructs, in an instant and only for that instant, the titanic personality of the visionary artist, offering an image of an exemplary absolute truth.

Obedience not to figures but to the poietic and abstract nature of architecture therefore leads Ruskin to consider any adherence to historical styles as nonsensical:

«The choice of Classical or Gothic, again using the latter term in its broadest sense, may be questionable when it regards some single and considerable public building; but I cannot conceive it questionable, for an instant, when it regards modern uses in general: I cannot conceive any architect insane enough to project the vulgarization of Greek architecture. Neither can it be rationally questionable whether we should adopt early or late, original or derivative Gothic»<sup>52</sup>.

51. *Ivi*, p. 251.

52. *Ivi*, p. 258.

And the apparently contradictory suggestion contained on the same page, i.e. the choice for the current architecture, of the “English earliest decorated”, should be read not in terms of stylistic choice but as a shorter way to rediscover a unique language, spoken and taught throughout the nation. A language that is not individual but collective, not the invention of a single person but a found form, a multiform expression of the circumstantiality of architectural practice.

For Ruskin, the specificity of architectural ornamentation does not have a grammatical nature, it is not a rhetorical adjectival<sup>53</sup>, but rather, as seen, it is a visible legality of the human use of matter to build architecture and a visible expenditure of human work, visibilities that require imperfect and incomplete figures because only as such are they capable of narrating the legitimate use of matter and the humanity of the constructive act.

The personality that Ruskin profiles for the creator of architecture is therefore not that of an inventor of forms nor that of a knower of historical styles capable of choosing and speaking the most appropriate one.

Ruskin imagines the architect as interpreter of a language that was already given, non-essential for the value of architecture – which as seen has other foundations – to the point that, speaking it, collecting it from national use and repeating it guided by the aforesaid dual legality – matter and work – he will know how to generate a new language just as Latin generated Italian, or Old English generated modern English<sup>54</sup>. The shift from the unique and extraordinary personality of the visionary artist to an impersonal dimension is radical and in some cases carries with it other sister arts.

«Originality in expression does not depend on invention of new words; nor originality in poetry on invention of new measures; nor, in painting, on invention of new colours, or new modes of using them. The chords of music, the harmonies of colour, the general principles of the arrangement of sculptural masses, have been determined long ago, and, in all probability, cannot be added to any more than they can be altered. Granting that they may be, such additions or alterations are much more the work of time and of multitudes than of individual inventors [...] A man who has the gift, will take up any style that is going, the style of his day, and will work in that, and be great in that, and make everything that he does in it look as fresh as if every thought of it had just come down from heaven. I do not say that he will not take liberties with his materials, or with his rules [...] and those liberties will be like the liberties that a great speaker takes with the language, not a defiance of its rules for the sake of singularity but inevitable, uncalculated, and brilliant consequences of an effort to express what the language, without such infraction, could not»<sup>55</sup>.

53. For the distinction between an ornament of a grammatical nature and a rhetoric distinct from the ornament as the construction of an order of matter, we refer again to the aforementioned essay on ornament by COOMARASWAMU 1939.

54. RUSKIN 1903c, VIII, p. 257.

55. *Ivi*, pp. 253-254.

The combination of art, literature and architecture is not artificial, moreover, because Ruskin is describing a creative structure that in his opinion they share, i.e. the structure of a commentary, a structure that, in the case of architecture as in the case of art leads not to a dependence on the rules but to total freedom from them and from canons. For painting as for architecture it is the principle of commentary that frees language from every rule.

The radical difference consists in the nature of the “text” of which art on the one hand and architecture on the other are commentaries. In fact, art is the commentary of a text – nature – that is not human and, as such, remains a sure guide even in the face of interpretative error. Architectural languages are a commentary to the abstract and totally human law of the legitimate use of matter – the governance of matter – and to the human, hopefully happy, offer of poetic work. In architecture, an error can therefore undermine both the text and the commentary to the text and this has obvious consequences with respect to the principle of authority of historical architecture, a subject to which we will return. More importantly, however, it opens the way for an absolute linguistic freedom bound only by the ability to find expression of the two founding laws of architecture: matter and human action of transformation: «When we can speak this dead language naturally, and apply it to whatever ideas we have to render, that is to say, to every practical purpose of life; then, and not till then, a license might be permitted, and individual authority allowed to change or to add to the received form»<sup>56</sup>.

As we shall see, in Venice Ruskin would find – was already finding, while writing the pages of *Seven Lamps* – the model of an architectural personality founded on the principle of the anonymous deriving from a conflictual, and yet necessary, coexistence of different historical languages able to bring out, thanks to their contradictory coexistence, a specific expressiveness of architecture as impersonal or extra-personal, being this anonymity also the evidence of its legitimacy.

The last topic that introduces an element of crisis in the figure of the visionary and prophetic artist put to the test by architecture is memory.

The temporal dimension of the visionary artist is, as mentioned, the “when is not”, the encounter, mystical, with the timelessness of divine truth and the prophetic dimension of the announcement of what will be at the moment of fulfilment. Even the “historical” artist finds value only if, typologically, he accesses eternity while dedicating himself to the narration of the present. The time of visionary art is therefore composed of a chain of extraordinary moments, of acts of vision, unique and unrepeatable, inextricably linked to the personality of the artist.

56. *Ivi*, p. 257.

In the Ruskinian view of architecture the temporal structure changes completely. The timelessness of the vision of natural truth, the basis for the theory of art, for architecture transforms into the topic of duration. By its divine nature, matter has eternal characteristics, but its transformation under the “dominion” of man weakens it, makes it ephemeral in the temporal dimension of human work.

«You talk of the scythe of Time, and the tooth of Time: I tell you, Time is scytheless and toothless; it is we who gnaw like the worm – we who smite like the scythe. It is ourselves who abolish – ourselves who consume: we are the mildew, and the flame; and the soul of man is to its own work as the moth that frets when it cannot fly, and as the hidden flame that blasts where it cannot illuminate. All these lost treasures of human intellect have been wholly destroyed by human industry of destruction; the marble would have stood its two thousand years as well in the polished statue as in the Parian cliff; but we men have ground it to powder, and mixed it with our own ashes»<sup>57</sup>.

If artwork puts man in contact with eternity, architectural work confronts him with the finite temporality that is inherent in his condition. And yet architecture also offers man a non-ephemeral and supra-temporal dimension, that is, the constants that, thanks to the sacrificial principle we have discussed, offer to the circumstantial progression of human work a guide that crosses time and therefore saves the architectural work from enslavement to history, from the search for models of perfection to refer to, sanctioning the abandonment of eclecticism. The figures of architecture have always been different through history, but the human measure, the “measure of darkness” that architecture does not hide but, to the contrary, assumes as its foundation and even its expression, remains constant. Indeed, it leads back to work that is always different in the results yet always the same in its structure, in its essence of comparison between matter and man who transforms it with his work. This generates an important dichotomy in Ruskinian thought.

On the one hand the original attraction for the value of art, of the inspired image, as a vehicle for man towards a dimension of eternity, on the other a progressive awareness of the value of human time of which architecture is a concrete witness. The evolution – or rather the articulation given the labyrinthine structure of Ruskinian thought – of the figures of creativity being studied is strongly influenced by the prevalence of one or the other aspect: value attributed to the inspired image that reflects a divine beauty, value of human work that testifies of historical events.

The balance between the recognition of the eternal temporal dimension of artistic expression and the progressive strengthening of the testimonial aspect of architecture as a historical fact will have a decisive influence in the Ruskinian positions on restoration.

Remaining with the *Seven Lamps*, sacrificing work also means sacrificing time and therefore architecture becomes a testimony of human commitment, constant and in time, aimed at making their work to transform matter legitimate.

57. «The accumulation and distribution of Art» (1857) in RUSKIN 1905a, XVI, pp. 64-65.

A testimony that, unlike the inspired work of art, takes on value in its collective and impersonal existence.

At this junction the narrative dimension reappears as necessary to transmit an action over time repeated by various subjects that cannot be witnessed by a single, icastic image.

«The ambition of the old Babel builders was well directed for this world: there are but two strong conquerors of the forgetfulness of men, Poetry and Architecture; and the latter in some sort includes the former, and is mightier in its reality: it is well to have, not only what men have thought and felt, but what their hands have handled, and their strength wrought, and their eyes beheld, all the days of their life»<sup>58</sup>.

The value of architecture is therefore increased thanks to the historical narration of human events of which it bears witness, and it is the constants present in this narration that do not make it a departure from the foundation, but, to the contrary, a repeated act of convergence with consequences on language that we have already noted.

The God of architecture is a «household God, as well as a heavenly one; He has an altar in every man's dwelling»<sup>59</sup> and its foundation is written in the «flesh-bound volume» mentioned above in the passage on man as «dark mirror», i.e. in the body of man himself who, thanks to the coming of Christ, can «in the Lord» take care of the things that happen here and now, in a non-prophetic but evangelical dimension.

The natural world where extraordinary beings, visionary artists, seek and show figures of divine beauty thus gives way to a world entrusted to men, to all men, whose task – of which architecture must become a tool – consists in experiencing it and passing it on intact to subsequent generations wounded the least possible by human imperfection. It is a work that does not have the instantaneous temporality of artistic vision but, to the contrary, a transgenerational and suprapersonal temporality.

«God has lent us the earth for our life; it is a great entail. It belongs as much to those who are to come after us, and whose names are already written in the book of creation, as to us; and we have no right, by anything that we do or neglect, to involve them in unnecessary penalties, or deprive them of benefits which it was in our power to bequeath. And this the more, because it is one of the appointed conditions of the labour of men that, in proportion to the time between the seed-sowing and the harvest, is the fulness of the fruit; and that generally, therefore, the farther off we place our aim, and the less we desire to be ourselves the witnesses of what we have laboured for, the more wide and rich will be the measure of our success. Men cannot benefit those that are with them as they can benefit those who come after them; and of all the pulpits from which human voice is ever sent forth, there is none from which it reaches so far as from the grave»<sup>60</sup>.

58. RUSKIN 1903c, VIII, p. 224.

59. *Ivi*, p. 227.

60. *Ivi*, p. 233.

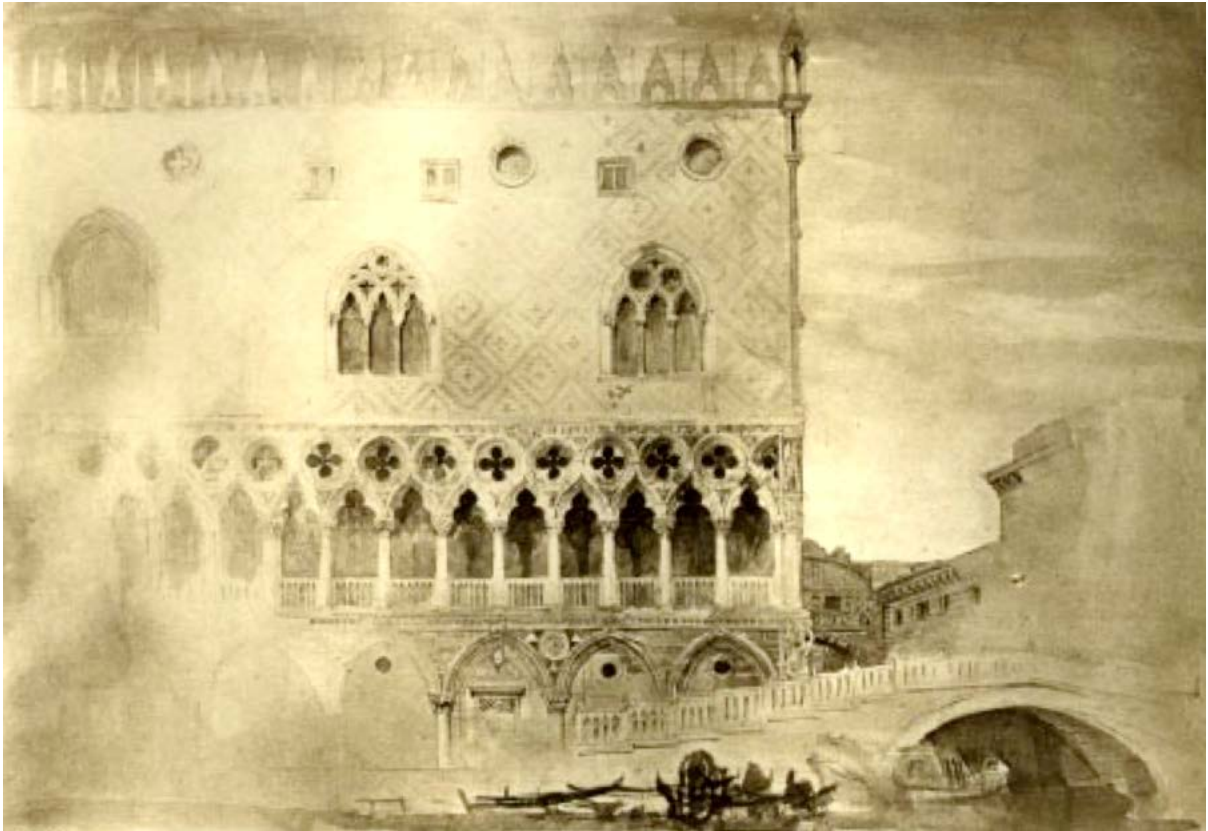
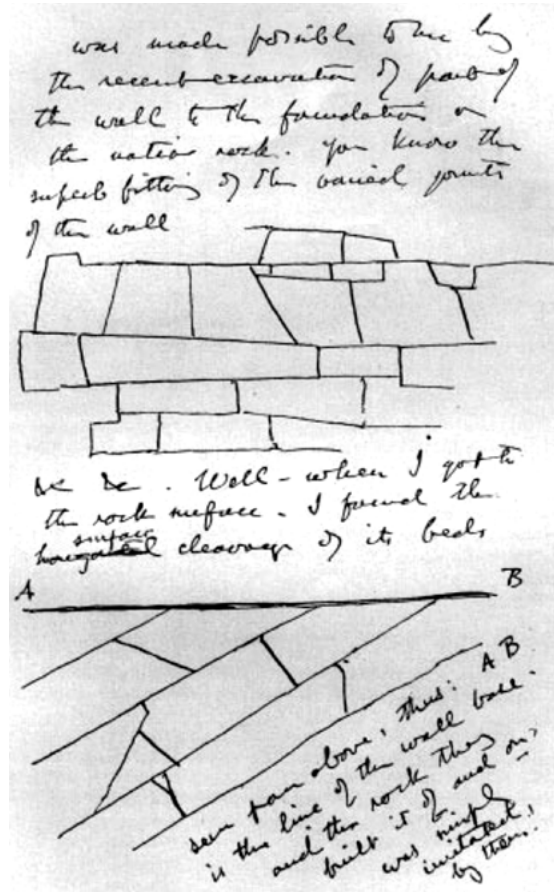
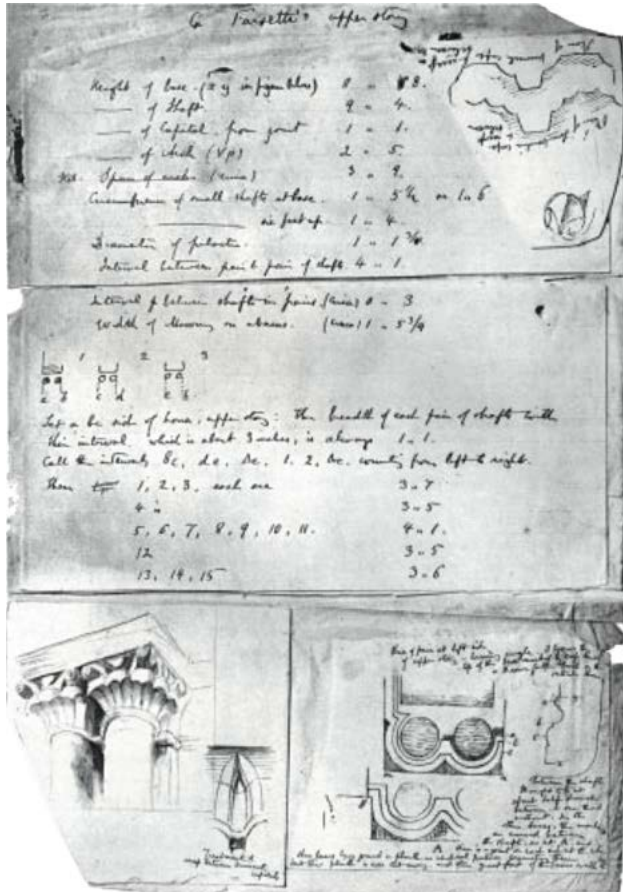


Figure 5. John Ruskin, *Exterior of Ducal Palace, Venice* (1845) (from RUSKIN 1903b, IV, p. 306).



From the left, figure 6. John Ruskin, *Notes at the Casa Farsetti* (from RUSKIN 1903d, IX, XVIII); figure 7. John Ruskin, *A Third Page from the same letters* (from RUSKIN 1909, XXXVII, p. 419).



The sacredness of architecture moves progressively towards a human dimension or, better, a superhumanity composed of the succession and merging of individual actions: «Let it not be for present delight, nor for present use alone; let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for, and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them»<sup>61</sup>.

### *Anonymous*

Concurrent with the release of *Seven Lamps*, with a series of trips and then long stays Ruskin started a study of Venice that within a couple of years became “incessant” and almost all-encompassing, leading to the drafting of the *Stones of Venice*, an accurate portrayal of a city whose importance derives from the fact that it «concludes, within the circuit of some seven or eight miles, the field of contest between the three pre-eminent architectures of the world: - each architecture expressing a condition of religion; each an erroneous condition, yet necessary to the correction of the others, and corrected by them»<sup>62</sup>.

He would go there in search of a definitive overcoming of the inspired image, of the invention of languages and figures as a guide for architecture in favour of an ever greater importance attributed to architectural works, to the «commandment written in the thing itself»<sup>63</sup> that sees architecture above all as a work of man and witness to his actions. On this path, which we will address in another place, the figures of creativity identified so far – the visionary and prophetic artist, the intellectual architect and the workman engaged in “happy work” – will be joined not so much by a new figure but rather by a new paradigm that we could define as the paradigm of the Anonymous. This paradigm will allow us to understand – returning to each of the figures profiled – Ruskinian positions on restoration to define the relationship, changeable in its system, between connoisseur, conservator and restorer.

With respect to architecture, the speed with which the work on Venice helps Ruskin to transcend the creative model of the artist based on inspired vision in favour of the process, poetic and narrative dimension of architecture is demonstrated by a letter to the father-literary agent who complains about the lack of saleability of the first volume of *Stones*, inviting his son to be more indulgent with the tastes of the public.

61. *Ibidem*.

62. RUSKIN 1903d, IX, p. 38.

63. *Ivi*, p. 6.

«I cannot write anything but what is in me and interests me. I never could write for the public – I never have written except under the conviction of a thing's being important, wholly irrespective of the public's thinking it so; and all my power, such as it is, would be lost, the moment I tried to catch people by fine writing. You know I promised them no Romance, I promised them stones. Not even bread. I do not feel any Romance in Venice. It is simply a heap of ruins, trodden under foot by such men as Ezekiel describes, XXI, 31; and this is the great fact which I want to teach, – to give Turner-esque descriptions of the thing would not have needed ten days' study or residence»<sup>64</sup>.

The biblical reference could not be more explicit: «Remove the diadem, and take off the crown: this shall not be the same: exalt him that is low, and abase him that is high. I will overturn, overturn, overturn, it: and it shall be no more, until he come whose right it is; and I will give it him». As Ruskin's work on Venice progressed, man would become more and more firmly the one to whom architecture belonged by right, and with growing conviction Ruskin would link his value more to the testimony of the non-artistic actions that determined it.

In *St-Mark's Rest* Ruskin will arrive at a clear distinction between prophecy «as a prediction of a good that is to be» and the Gospel as the voice of the “Messenger who says it is here”.

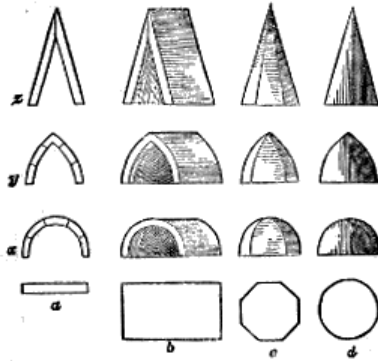
«But to understand the course of legend, you must know what the Greek teachers meant by an Evangelion, as distinct from a Prophecy. Prophecy is here thought of in its narrower sense as the foretelling of a good that is to be. But an Evangelion is the voice of the Messenger, saying, it is here. And the four mystic Evangelists, under the figures of living creatures, are not types merely of the men that are to bring the Gospel message, but of the power of that message in all Creation – so far as it was, and is, spoken in all living things, and as the Word of God, which is Christ, was present, and not merely prophesied, in the Creatures of His hand»<sup>65</sup>.

Christ was not “seen” by the Evangelists, he writes, «though told of by them. But, as the Word by which all things were made, He is seen in all things made (*John* I. 1-3 in the note), and in the Poiesis of them»<sup>66</sup>.

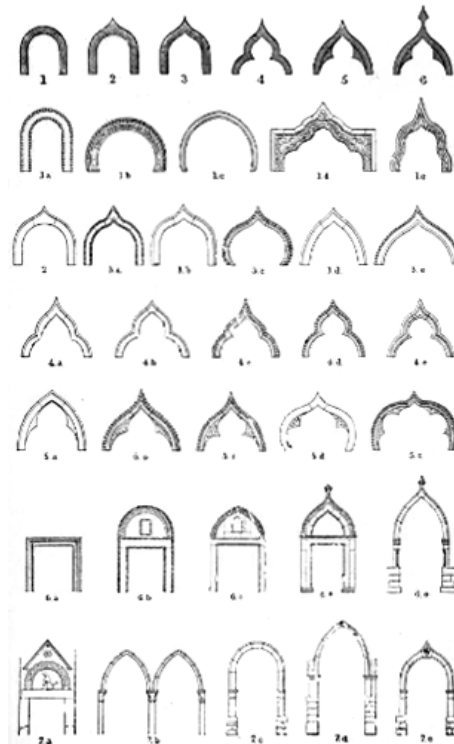
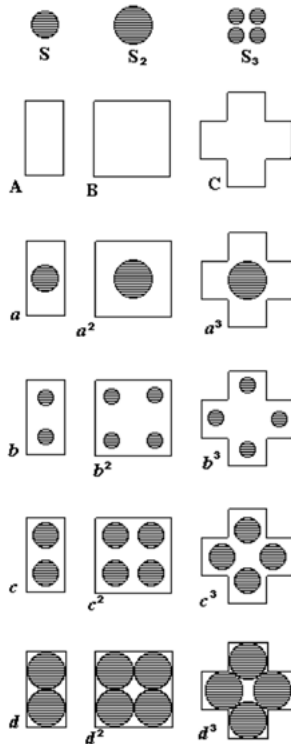
64. *Ivi*, IX, XXXVI.

65. RUSKIN 1906, XXIV, pp. 296-297.

66. *Ivi*, p. 302.



From the left, figures 9-11. John Ruskin, *Roofs - The Shaft - The Orders of Venetian Arches*, (da J. RUSKIN, *The Stones of Venice*, Aldine Book Publishing Co., Boston 1890, p. 61, p. 100, p. 248).



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