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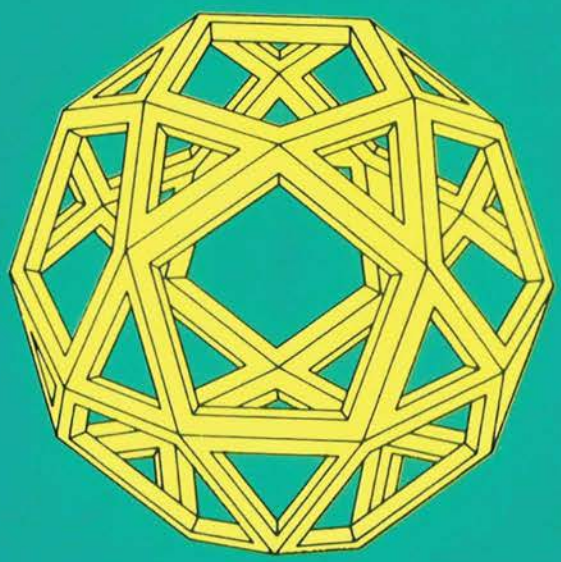

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WRITING ON, THE MARGINS OF ARCHITECTURE

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The ancients knowing from the nature of things . . . that if they neglected this main point they should never produce any thing great or commendable, did in their works propose to themselves chiefly the imitation of nature, as the greatest artist at all manner of compositions; and for this purpose they laboured, as far as the industry of man could reach to discover the laws upon which she herself acted in the production of her works, in order to transfer them to the business of architecture. (Leon Battista Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture*, p. 195, 1452)

I say therefore, that architecture, as well as all other arts, being an imitatrix of nature, can suffer nothing that either alienates or deviates from that which is agreeable to nature . . . . (Andrea Palladio, *Four Books on Architecture*, p. 25, 1570)

I had noted, that all art was then in truest perfection when it might be reduced to some natural Principle. For what are the most judicious Artisans but the Mimiques of Nature? (Henry Wotton, *Elements of Architecture*, p. 7, 1624)

It is the same in architecture as in all other arts: its principles are founded on simple nature, and nature's process clearly indicate its rules. (Marc-Antoine Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture*, p. 11, 1753)

. . . what I understand by art is everything that aims at imitating nature; that no architect has attempted the task I have undertaken; and that if I succeed, as I dare hope I shall, in proving that architecture, as far as its relations with nature are concerned, has perhaps an even greater advantage than the other arts . . . . (Etienne-Louis Boullé, *Architecture, Essay on Art*, p. 85, 1785)

. . . whatever is in architecture fair or beautiful, is imitated from natural forms. (John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, p. 71, 1849)

> . . . given inherent vision there is no source so fertile, so suggestive, or helpful aesthetically for the architects as a comprehension of natural law. (Frank Lloyd Wright, *In the Cause of Architecture*, p. 63, 1908)

> Architecture is the first manifestation of man creating his own universe, creating it in the image of nature, submitting to the laws of nature, the laws which govern our own nature, our universe. (Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, pp. 69–70, 1923)

I

In a field primarily concerned with the making of habitable objects, writing is bound to occupy a unique, if not somewhat peculiar position. What I wish to explore in this paper are the peculiarities of the task of writing on architecture.

That writing is allotted a role in the field of architecture is in itself something of an oddity. What is even more peculiar, however, is that the field historically delegates to the written discourse the crucial task of defining its parameters, setting forth a concise definition of its subject matter, and accordingly making a clear determination of what it is that the practitioners of the field must do. Since the resurgence of the written discourse on architecture at the outset of the Renaissance, numerous authors have made concerted efforts to isolate and mark, once and for all, the boundaries and the margins of the field and thereby separate its internal and inherent concerns from the marginal and the extraneous issues that are often said to encumber its progress. Considering the plurality of the attempts made as well as the considerable contextual differences between the various determinations, it is surprising that one finds a remarkable constancy in the extant definition of the parameters of the field through time.

It was Vitrivius, the Roman architect and theoretician, who laid the foundation in the first century BC when he proclaimed that all buildings 'must be built with due reference to durability, convenience, and beauty'.[1] Virtually every author in the field since has upheld these principles, with various degrees of emphasis, as the most fundamental principles of the art of building. Leon Battista Alberti reiterated them in 1452 when he mandated that all buildings 'be accommodated to their respective purposes, stout and strong for duration and pleasant and delightful to the sight'.[2] Henry Wotton re-phrased them in 1624 in terms that are more readily familiar to the succeeding generations of architects, including our own, as 'Commodity, Firmness, and Delight'.[3]

Although the authors of this discourse are often critical, if not contemptuous, of their predecessors' work, nevertheless they all appear to agree not only on the above fundamental principles but also on the greater importance of the third principle mandating all buildings to be beautiful. Of the three, beauty is deemed the most important because it, in effect, is said to constitute the limits that separate the art of building — the proper subject of theoretical speculation in this discourse — from the mere building — considered a menial activity unworthy of theoretical pursuit. Alberti, for instance, emphasizing the fact that the principle of delight 'is by much the most noble of all and very necessary besides', reasoned that 'the

having satisfied necessity is a very small matter, and the having provided for conveniency affords no manner of pleasure, where you are shocked by the deformity of the work.' Therefore, to prevent the shock of *deformity* — the shock that invariably stands to reason the necessity of *beauty* in this discourse — he concludes: 'your whole care, diligence and expense . . . should all tend to this, that whatever you build may be not only useful and convenient, but also . . . delightful to the sight.'[4]

Nearly five hundred years and numerous reiterations later, Le Corbusier was to express a similar sentiment when he wrote: 'When a thing responds to a need, it is not beautiful . . . Architecture has another meaning and other ends to pursue than showing construction and responding to needs.'[5] The 'aim of architecture' as Corbu put it, or rather the aim that is architecture insofar as this aim, this other 'meaning' or 'end' distinguishes architecture from mere building, is an absolute on whose definition virtually all theoreticians of the field also appear to concur. It is, in the abstract, an unmitigated state of formal presence whose designate is an absence of need for addition or subtraction. John Ruskin summed up an unanimous sentiment in this discourse when he wrote in 1853 'that a noble building never has any extraneous or superfluous ornaments; that all its parts are necessary to its loveliness, and that no single atom of them could be removed without harm to its life'. The 'end' in every work of architecture, he concluded, is 'a perfect creature capable of nothing less than it has, and needing nothing more'.[6]

The pursuit of this 'end' has historically determined not only the parameters of the field but also the parameters of the task of writing on architecture. Therefore, every author who has wished to bring the task of writing to a closure has had to address two imperative questions: where to locate and how to procure the desired absolute. The latter question, as one may well expect, has been a source of much dispute among the various authors of the discourse. The answer to the former question, peculiarly enough, is a virtual constant: the source of beauty is nature.

In succession, numerous authors in the field have turned to nature in search of an absolute whose mimesis is presumed to assure the fulfilment of their common 'aim'. Even though the prevalent attitude in this discourse is one of utter contempt for imitation, the unwavering proposition of the discourse is the imitation of nature as the origin of all that is beautiful and perfect. This concurrent approbation and denunciation of imitation does not imperatively point to an obvious contradiction but instead to a pervasive distinction between two types of imitation: the good and the bad imitation or the formative and the formal reiteration.

The term 'nature' has both a passive and an active sense in this discourse. It refers both to a body of objects — be they all beautiful or not — and to an active process of formation — the formation of beautiful bodies. It is in this latter sense that various authors have proposed the imitation of nature as the ultimate 'aim' of architecture. The imitation at issue, in other words, is not the imitation of natural forms — this is generally considered to be a contemptible activity for architects — but the imitation of nature as 'the greatest artist at all manner of composition',[7] the greatest artist whose work, nevertheless, is said to be regulated by a set of self-imposed rules and principles that collectively warrant the perfection of every composition. A set of constant, though secret laws that every author in turn seeks to unravel and reveal.

It is perhaps needless to point out that the laws of nature have had nearly as

varied an interpretation in this discourse as there have been authors in the field. What the Renaissance authors proclaimed as the laws of nature differs markedly from their counterparts' proclamations during the Enlightenment or the Modern period. The ideal and the invariably natural composition to which nothing could be added or taken away without loss could not be any different, at times from one generation to the next. However it is precisely these overwhelming differences in both the interpretation of the laws of nature and the way in which the ideal composition is circumscribed that make the constancy of the proposal to imitate nature ever more curious.

One implication of this constant proposal, the one that I wish primarily to focus on here, is that the ideal, the 'aim', or the 'end' in the field is, by force of definition, always prefigured by nature. As innocuous as such a matter may seem, it has far-reaching consequences for the perception of the role of writing in the field. Since the subject of the written discourse — the absolute that constitutes and separates architecture from mere building — is presumed always to precede the discourse as a natural phenomenon, the task of writing, as Laugier succinctly put it, is no more and no less than 'to tear away the veil which covers it'.[8] From Laugier's torch to Ruskin's lamps, Light has been the prevalent metaphor for the comprehension of the task of writing on architecture. The written discourse is purported to do nothing other than to shed an insightful light on the eternal nature of a subject whose parameters each generation presumes hidden from the last due to blindness, ignorance, or sheer indolence.

Although the perception of writing as an act of *revelation* or unmasking of the concealed parameters of architecture may initially appear to give writing a central role in the field, in effect it marginalizes writing by reducing its role to a supplemental source of *light* shed from without on an otherwise autonomous subject. The prevalent perception of the relationship between architecture and writing is that of a sovereign subject, secure inside its inherent, natural parameters, to a subservient text that is said to contemplate, reveal, or unmask the subject from the outside.

The supplemental role the written discourse is said to play with respect to its subject is conspicuously similar to the role ornamentation is purported to play with respect to the aesthetic object. The relationship between these roles is what I wish to explore further for the remainder of this work. I shall try to demonstrate in time that it is not so much light as it is ornament and all the paradoxes and inconsistencies that permeate its historic marginalization in the field that best describe the task of writing on architecture. What I also wish to point out is that it is through the marginalization and exclusion of ornamentation that the written discourse on architecture in effect denies its own role, or what amounts to the same, safeguards the perception of its role as revelation and exposition.

II

In the numerous attempts to edify or else unravel and reveal what can accept neither addition nor subtraction without loss, the written discourse on architecture characteristically encounters a dilemma, namely, how to account for and where to place ornamentation with respect to the aesthetic object? This dilemma is in

part owing to the recognition of a role that is perhaps best described by Alberti in the following passage:

> It is generally allowed that the pleasure and delight which we feel on the view of any building, arise from nothing else but beauty and ornament, since there is hardly any man so melancholy or stupid, so rough or unpolished, but what is very much pleased with what is beautiful and pursues those things which are most adorned, and rejects the unadorned and neglected; and if in anything that he views he perceives any ornament is wanting, he declares that there is something deficient which would make the work more delightful and noble.[9]

I will return to this passage and discuss it in greater detail later. For now let us note that we are consistently told that the beautiful cannot accept either addition or subtraction without loss. However, from Alberti's description of ornament as a 'dress' that covers the body beautiful, to Laugier's description of it as all 'that can be admitted or suppressed without changing the thing fundamentally', to Ruskin's definition of it as 'things that may be taken away from the building, and not hurt it', to Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's view of architecture as a 'Shed' decorated with *explicit* 'appliqué ornaments', ornamentation is purported never to be anything but an external addition. Hence the perplexing question that variously confronts the authors of the field: what to ascribe to and how to reconcile the aesthetic contribution of ornamentation, if the 'aim' is to produce what can accept neither addition nor subtraction without loss?

One group of authors circumvent the problem through the deprecation and complete exclusion of ornamentation from architecture. Adolf Loos's equation of ornamentation to crime in particular and much of the discourse on modern architecture in general exemplify this position.[10] Modern architects, however, as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown have aptly pointed out, were only 'denying in theory what they were doing in practice'.[11] In other words, the deprecation of ornamentation did not produce the desired resolution, for in the end it could not be fully dispensed with in spite of a resolute effort. This is perhaps partly in lieu of Alberti's prophecy regarding the deficiency that marks the absence of ornamentation in architecture.

The authors who have tried to appropriate, though never willing or able fully to assimilate ornamentation, have fared no better in this discourse. The analogy that these authors often draw upon to illustrate the place and the role of ornamentation in the field is that of master and servant. Ornament is commonly said to offer the dispensable, hence permissible, services of a subordinate 'servant' to a superior absolute that ultimately can make do without the service. Should the services of this 'servant' be called upon, however, the customary advice is to observe extreme caution. This 'servant' is an unruly one and its services are marred by the threat of an imminent danger. Ruskin warns us:

> Lose your authority over it, let it command you, or lead you, or dictate to you in any wise, and it is an offence, an encumbrance, and a dishonour. And it is always ready to do this; wild to get the bit in its teeth, and rush forth on its own device.[12]

So long as ornamentation can be made to assume a subordinate role, it is a permissible addition. Otherwise, it must be chastised and chased beyond the parameters of the field. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown offer much the same advice when they tell us:

> It is now time to reevaluate the once-horrifying statement of John Ruskin that architecture is the decoration of construction, but we should append the warning of Pugin: It is all right to decorate construction, but never construct decoration.[13]

Although the proposed distinction between *ornamentation* as decoration of construction and *ornamentation* as constructed decoration is a prevalent distinction in this discourse, it has never been free of difficulties. The difference between the subordinate and the insubordinate ornament is something of an enigma because the line that is presumed to separate the two has been at best difficult to pinpoint. For instance, Ruskin tells us:

> How far this subordination is in different situations to be expressed, or how far it may be surrendered, and ornament, the servant, be permitted to have independent will; and by what means the subordination is best to be expressed when it is required, are by far the most difficult questions I have ever tried to work out respecting any branch of art . . .[14]

To understand better the difficulty contingent upon determining the place and role of ornamentation — a determination that is inevitably linked to the determination of the parameters of the field and the task of writing — I propose to take a closer look at one such attempt, namely, Leon Battista Alberti's discussion of beauty and ornamentation in his *Ten Books on Architecture* of 1452. Although virtually every other author in this discourse grapples with more or less the same issues, I have chosen Alberti's text in part because of his exceptionally meticulous and comprehensive discussion of the issues at hand and in part because this text is sufficiently removed from us in time and yet its concerns are all too familiar, if not all too immediate.

III

Not unlike the person confronted with 'the unadorned and neglected' who declares 'there is something deficient which would make the work more delightful and noble', Alberti too declares a certain deficiency in the field as justification for undertaking the task of writing the *Ten Books on Architecture*. Before this task is complete, the similarities between ornamentation and writing will exceed the supplantation of a deficiency in their respective subjects by way of revelation and exposition. Of this more has to be said later. For now we should note that Alberti's intent in writing the *Ten Books* was to 'free' the 'science' of architecture — 'a difficult, knotty and commonly obscured subject' — from 'its present ruin and oppression'. The obscurity of the subject is owing to the loss of a clarifying frame known to the ancients

and subsequently lost to the ravages of time. Therefore, the task of writing, as Alberti sees it, is to explicate, once more, the 'obscured' parameters of the field through the exposition of the natural principles that inherently delimit its concerns. Of these, we have been told, the principle of pleasure and delight is by far 'the most noble of all and very necessary besides'.[15] Therefore, following the assertion that 'the pleasure and delight which we feel on the view of any building, arise from nothing else but beauty and ornament', Alberti takes up each subject in turn and studiously discusses the contribution of each in six of the ten books.

First, Alberti tells us, 'we should erect our buildings naked, and let it be quite completed before we begin to dress it with ornament.'[16] This analogy prefigures, for the most part, the contribution of each subject. Of the body and the dress of architecture, it is primarily the body that is subject to the natural laws of beauty and as such it is also the body that is chiefly responsible for 'the pleasure and delight which we feel on the view of any building'. Hence, the body must first be erected nude and complete to the point of requiring neither addition nor subtraction. To this 'end', Alberti provides specific guidelines pertaining to the numbers, the harmonic proportions and the congruous relationship of the various parts of the edifice.[17] Since the mathematico-geometric nature of these guidelines makes it impossible to alter each without altering the result, the specification of the end result, arbitrarily or otherwise, inevitably warrants that 'nothing could be added, diminished or altered' in the nude body once the specified end is reached.[18] A thorough discussion of these guidelines is beyond the limited scope of this study. Suffice to say that they are purported to be the operating principles in each and every beautiful composition of nature.

Once the nude body beautiful is complete, it must be dressed. Ornament, in turn constitutes all that is added to cover the body as dress. For instance, Alberti tells us that the 'outward coat' of the wall is an ornament in that it is not an integral part of 'the body of the wall itself', but a dress that covers it. The ornamental outward coat, however, can itself be adorned with figures, paintings and other similar additions. It too, in other words, can be considered a nude body and then dressed. The column, Alberti tells us, is 'the principal ornament in all architecture'.[19] Yet, as a body subject to the laws of beauty, it itself can be dressed with different ornaments, e.g., different shafts, bases, capitals, etc. In turn, the building to the body of which the column is added as ornament, may serve as ornament to larger bodies. For instance, 'a temple well built and handsomely adorned is the greatest and noblest ornament a city can have.'[20] In short, 'ornaments are in a manner infinite', whereby each dress can be considered a nude body in want of a dress in an endless chain of ornamentation.[21]

Although 'ornaments are in a manner infinite', not every ornament is proper for all parts of the building or all building types. In general, the type and the quantity of ornaments determine the status of the body to which they are affixed as dress. Without ornaments it would be virtually impossible to distinguish the status of one nude body from another, 'the meaner' from 'the more honourable'.

It is important to note at this point that ornament is not a specific thing. The word does not even denote a specific class of things. Although in the abstract ornament is defined as a dress, this definition, as Alberti aptly points out, only engenders an infinite chain in so far as each dress consists of a body subject to

further dressing. There is, therefore, nothing in architecture that can be specifically designated an ornament. This is, in part, because ornament is not so much a thing as it is a process, not so much a distinct dress as the dressing of the body beautiful. What ornamentation names is the act of differentiation — the *becoming* distinct of the body beautiful in perpetuity. This function, however, as we shall discuss later, far exceeds the determination of the status of the body. It is partly in recognition of this excess that Alberti tells us: 'ornaments annexed to all sorts of buildings make an essential part of architecture.'[22]

Setting aside, for the moment, the question of how something that is by definition annexed or added can be an essential part or a part at all, there are certain rules to be observed and certain precautionary steps to be taken in the application of ornaments. This essential part, as numerous authors have warned us, can potentially be a destructive annexation. The sensible content of ornament — its colour, texture, or material — can divert the attention of the onlooker. Instead of seeing the dressed body, the onlooker may end up seeing only the dress. Hence, Alberti recommends the annexation of this essential part only insofar as there is no chance of interference. A good and a permissible ornament, he tells us, is a beautiful one, the one that charms not by its sensible content, but by the beauty of its design:

> . . . I believe . . . that whoever considers the true nature of ornament in building will be convinced, that it is not expense so much that is requisite, as taste and contrivance.[23]
>
> I, for my part, hate everything that favours of luxury or profusion, and am best pleased with those ornaments which arise principally from the ingenuity and beauty of the contrivance.[24]

Ornament must be beautiful before it can be added as a dress. However, even though each aesthetic object is a potential ornament and though each permissible ornament must be a pleasing and delightful object when judged on its own merits, nevertheless once it is annexed to a body as ornament, it is no longer its beauty that contributes to the pleasure and delight felt in view of that body but its function as an addition to the body. Ornament must be essentially beautiful, yet what makes ornament essential is not its formal beauty, but the role it plays vis-à-vis the body to which it is annexed. Of the essential role of ornamentation, Alberti writes:

> How extraordinary a thing (says the person introduced in *Tully*) is a handsome youth in *Athens*! This critic in beauty found that there was something deficient or superfluous, in the persons he disliked, which was not compatible with the perfection of beauty, which I imagine might have been obtained by means of ornament, by painting and concealing anything that was deformed, and trimming and polishing what was handsome; so that the unsightly parts might have given less offence, and the more lovely more delight. If this be granted we may define ornament to be a kind of an auxiliary brightness and improvement [complement] to beauty. So that then beauty is somewhat lovely which is proper and innate, and diffused over the whole body, and ornament somewhat added or fastened on, rather than proper and innate.[25]

This critic in beauty dislikes that which is not compatible with the perfection of beauty. To please the critic, Alberti offers ornament as a remedy and by its 'means' obtains the pleasing perfection of beauty. What, we may ask, are these 'means' and how does ornament obtain compatibility?

Before the advent of beauty, or in the place of its absence, there is either *deficiency*, i.e., an inner part of the body missing from within, or else *superfluousness*, i.e., a foreign part joined to the body from without. In either case, there is a disseminated totality. There is a body with indeterminate boundaries: an unsightly ugly something which has neither a proper inside nor a determinable outside. To this disseminated totality ornament is annexed as remedy. The addition makes the incompatible, the deficient or the superfluous compatible with the perfection of beauty. The task implies either the provision of the missing part of the deficient or the subtraction of the extra part of the superfluous. The added ornament, however, is neither the missing part of the deficient nor the extra part of the superfluous. Ornament by definition provides no assimilable parts and is never assimilated by the body beautiful. It is and remains foreign to both the compatible and the incompatible. It is always an 'added' or 'fastened on' other on both sides of an equation which it alone makes possible. Incompatible + ornament = compatible + ornament.

Ornament, Alberti tells us, turns dislike and disgust into pleasure and delight by 'trimming' and 'polishing' the 'more lovely' as it paints and hides the 'unsightly'. Ornament, in other words, is neither a simple inclusion nor a simple exclusion. If anything it plays a double role: acting at once as light and shadow, revealing and concealing, including and excluding in one and the same gesture. Ornament's insightful light reveals the 'innate' and the 'proper' as it casts a blinding shadow over what lies beyond the periphery of the proper: the incompatible ugly other. Where, however, is this rim, this periphery or boundary separating the beautiful from the ugly, the compatible from the incompatible, the perfect from the imperfect, before ornament is 'added' or 'fastened on'? The ramifications of this question are grave because the parameters at issue are the very parameters that separate architecture from mere building, the beautiful edifice from the deficient construct, and ultimately the text from the subject it is said to contemplate and reveal from a distance.

As 'auxiliary brightness', Alberti would have us assume, ornament adds its light to the light of beauty and 'improves' or complements its intensity, making beauty shine ever brighter in the foreground amid a concealed and shadowy background. What ornament is said to *improve*, however, does not precede it. If ornament adds its light to the light of beauty, it adds itself to an undifferentiated, unperceived light before the addition. It is, after all, precisely the absence of this light that mandates addition. Also, it is only after the addition that we are able to differentiate the undifferentiated, undifferentiable compatible and proper from the incompatible and the improper in the same perspicuous manner that light is differentiated from shadow. Ornament, in other words, is not so much the 'auxiliary brightness' that Aberti wishes it to be, as it is that which in the absence of any clear borders, any pre-defined parameters, is imposed, not unlike a frame, on a disseminated totality.[26] In turn, it marks the advent of differentiation and the emergence of opposition. Ornament constitutes the very periphery, parameter or boundary that is presumed to pre-exist its addition as 'auxiliary brightness'.

Ornament, as Alberti contends, is an essential part of architecture, and it is so not only as an addition to the body deficient or superfluous, but as an addition to the body beautiful as well. In fact, ornament is so essential that there can be no 'art of building', no beautiful edifices, before ornament is added, on the one hand, to impose and thus expose its parameters and, on the other hand, to fill and thus fulfil the desire for beauty.

> . . . it is undeniable that there may be in the mere form or figure of a building, an innate excellence and beauty, which strikes and delights the mind, and is immediately perceived where it is, as much as it is missed where it is not . . . .[27]

This innately beautiful building, however, Alberti concludes, 'no man can bear to see naked of ornament.' And no man can bear to see the body beautiful nude because:

> . . . there is hardly any man so melancholy or stupid, so rough or unpolished, but what is very much pleased with what is beautiful, and pursues those things which are most adorned and rejects the unadorned and neglected; and if any thing he views he perceives any ornament is wanting, he declares that there is something deficient which would make the work more delightful and noble.[28]

A healthy mind rejects, so Alberti contends, the unadorned and neglected because what is not adorned, the nude body as such, is deficient. The place of ornament, in other words, is marked by a gap or lack in the body to which ornament comes as an addition. The nude body beautiful must be dressed, that is, completed with a dress before it can give pleasure and delight. The deficient, and the nude body is nothing but, can only cause dislike and disgust. Therefore, the beautiful is, must be, always already dressed, framed or adorned before it appears as such and delights the onlooker. The dress, however, it should be remembered, in order to allow the beauty of the body shine forth must itself be beautiful. To be beautiful, the body of the dress must itself be dressed or ornamented while the ornament to the ornament must be beautiful before it can be added to complete. There is, in other words, a paradox here. Each beautiful body as such assumes prior ornamentation while each ornament assumes prior beauty. Each leads us back to the other in a constant deferral with no beginning and no end: an endless frame-up.

Where are we then to locate beauty, that absolute to which nothing can be added or taken away? How are we to account for a deficiency in perfection, a certain gap or lack, a certain internal indeterminacy that requires addition? How are we to privilege the beautiful over the ugly if the pernicious deficiency that is said to constitute a most radical difference between the beautiful and the ugly turns out to be a shared characteristic. In sum, where are the 'obscured' parameters that this text had set out to unravel and reveal?

Insofar as ornament points to a need for addition in the body that must require no addition to be itself, insofar as the beautiful must be, is always, completed with something other than itself — neither proper nor inner by definition — in order to be its perfect self, the parameters are nowhere to be found.

IV

The text within whose volume Alberti appends ornamentation as a remedy to the deficient or the superfluous is itself, if we recall, an appendage to 'a difficult, knotty and commonly obscured subject'. It too is appended as 'a kind of an auxiliary brightness', the point and purpose of which is to reveal and redeem the *obscured* parameters of architecture in a state of 'oppression and ruin'. What this text reveals, however, if it could be said to *reveal* anything, is not a sovereign subject outside the text, but an ornamented subject within the text. The body beautiful never appears in this text without a dress, which is tantamount to not appearing at all, be this divorced from the text or within it. However, Alberti insists, and for all intents and purposes rightly so, that the ornamental appendage is nothing but a dress. If it brings an insightful light to bear on the body, this light is only 'a kind of an auxiliary brightness'. If ornament contributes to pleasure and delight felt in view of the body, it is by way of a 'complement': of *more* light and *more* delight. In turn, what is simply more, what is 'auxiliary' and supplemental, is also unnecessary and inessential. What is fastened on can readily be removed without real loss. Yet, as we have seen, this constitutes only half the story.

The ornamental remedy is at once a poison. If ornament adds, it also subtracts. If it completes, it also points to a deficiency in what it completes. The ornament that redeems the beautiful also denies the beautiful its perfection. What Alberti gains by ornamentation, he has already lost to decoration. This is the paradox of ornamentation. However, the textual appendage is meant to unravel and reveal what requires neither addition nor subtraction. If Alberti undertakes the arduous task of writing on architecture, his point and purpose is not to confound but to separate the beautiful from the ugly, the sufficient from the deficient, architecture from mere building. To this 'end' ornament is certainly an impediment. It is also indispensable. To reveal the body beautiful, Alberti must dress it; to reveal its perfection, he must remove the dress. The latter only reveals a deficiency. Therefore, if the text is to live up to its promise of revelation, short of removing the ornamentation, Alberti must render it removable without having to remove it: hence the very usage of the dress as a metaphor for comprehending the role of ornamentation.

This metaphor is, in other words, neither arbitrary nor accidental. The perception of the task of writing as a venture of discovery and not invention, of revelation and not the textual construction of the parameters of architecture depends on it. The text can only marginalize its own role, i.e., it can only claim a truth value for what it purports only to be revealing from a distance, if ornament is nothing but a dress or 'a kind of an auxiliary brightness'.

If this metaphor is compelling and persuasive that is not because ornament is 'a kind of an auxiliary brightness' but because from the outset the beautiful is said to be a *natural* absolute divorced from the text and independent of the textual and the ornamental revelations. It is because Alberti has already dressed the subject before subjecting it to ornamentation.

Before the ornamental appendage, we should recall, there is the written text itself on the margins of the field filling the place of a primal deficiency in its subject. This is the want of a pre-determined, natural margin or borderline. The remedy

to this deficiency — the initial dress — is the imposition of beauty as the criterion that allows Alberti to separate architecture from mere building. This delimitational dress is further augmented by nature as 'the origin of all that is beautiful and perfect'. The natural dress in turn places the beautiful before any and all ornamental appendages. As the original term, by a natural decree, the beautiful need no longer assume prior ornamentation as the condition of its appearance because it has already appeared in nature, even if obscured and unseen before the textual revelation. Regardless of what it may accomplish, the ornamental appendage can be nothing but an auxiliary brightness by virtue of its assigned place in the timely and resolute order of appearances: beauty before ornamentation, architecture before the written revelation, and nature before cultural invention and construction.

Therefore, if ornament is, as Alberti insists, 'a kind of an auxiliary brightness' that is because his text has already assumed the paradoxical role of what it seeks to reduce to a supplemental source of light. The text has already become the paradox it is meant to resolve. It has already become both a remedy and a poison, an addition and a subtraction at once: not only 'a kind of an auxiliary brightness' but also the origin of light and the impossibility of a determinable origin. As an ornamental appendage, the insightful light that writing is said to shed over its subject is accompanied by a blinding shadow cast over its own operation. By assuming an ambivalent supplemental role vis-à-vis its subject, i.e., by reducing its own operation to an act of revelation, writing ensures the truth value of what it purports only to be revealing. What writing promises at the outset, however, it denies in the end. The sovereign subject as such never appears before, or for that matter after, the external supplemental addition that is writing. What the text brings to *light* is an endless chain of ornamentation from beauty to nature to the infinity of the ornamental appendage as a dress. The endless demarcation of borderlines within the text in effect frames and defines the subject after the fact, by supplying what is missing and missed in the subject from the outset, i.e., a clarifying frame or borderline. Each appended dress takes the place of a deficiency in the last in an infinite chain with neither beginning nor end. To reveal, Alberti must resort to ornamentation. The ornament, however, denies what it provides. It makes impossible what it makes possible. At once.

As a final note, I wish to point out that my intent is not to prove that architecture is not natural, that ornament is not a dress, that texts do not reveal, that beauty cannot be attained, or any variation thereof, but that these ideas are not independent of each other, that they do not exist in isolation. They are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. The terms beauty, nature, revelation, ornamentation, etc., carry the load of a lasting and pervasive tradition. One cannot take either term lightly or dispense with it at will in isolation or even collectively without assuming the weight of the tradition.

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NOTES

1 Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, translated by Morris Hicky Morgan, Dover Publications Inc., New York, 1960, p. 17.
2 Leon Battista Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture*, 1755 Leoni Edition, Transatlantic Arts Inc., 1966, p. 112.
3 Henry Wotton, *The Elements of Architecture*, London, 1624, Da Capo Press, New York, 1970, p. 1. Also see Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1972.
4 Leon Battista Alberti, op. cit., pp. 112–13. We should note that the emphasis on beauty is peculiar to the Western architectural discourse as it is not found — not by the same definition, at any rate — in other discursive traditions. Two prominent examples are the Indian and the Chinese traditions. Of course this is not to imply that there is no regulative process in these other examples, but that the criteria used for restricting and regulating architectural practice differs markedly from those in the West.
5 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, translated by Frederick Etchells, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1960, pp. 102–103.
6 John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, London, 1851–3, p. 400.
7 Leon Battista Alberti, op. cit., p. 195.
8 Marc-Antoine Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture*, translated by Wolfgang and Annie Hermman, Hennesey & Ingalls Inc., Los Angeles, 1977, p. 2.
9 Leon Battista Alberti, op. cit., p. 112.
10 Ulrich Conrads, *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-century Architecture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1980, p. 19.
11 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, op. cit., p. 114.
12 John Ruskin, op. cit., pp. 256–7.
13 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, op. cit., p. 163.
14 John Ruskin, op. cit., pp. 236–7.
15 Leon Battista Alberti, op. cit., p. 112.
16 ibid., p. 203.
17 These guidelines are substantially the same as those advanced by Le Corbusier some five hundred years later.
18 Whether or not the specified end constitutes the beautiful is of course open to question and questioned it has been.
19 Leon Battista Alberti, op. cit., p. 130.
20 ibid., p. 136.
21 ibid.
22 ibid., p. 162.
23 ibid., p. 187.
24 ibid., p. 192.
25 ibid., p. 113.
26 For a thorough discussion of the role of ornament as a frame see Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987.
27 Leon Battista Alberti, op. cit., p. 203.
28 ibid., p. 112.