A cura di
Esterino Adami
Antonella Amatuzzi
Laura Ramello

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“Why Had I not Mr. Ruskin's Power to Create Landscapes with Words?”: Sketching, Naming and Representing the Dolomites in Amelia Edwards's Untrodden Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys

Eleonora Federici
Università di Napoli L'Orientale

“Why had I not Mr. Ruskin's power to create landscapes with words?”: Amelia Edwards wrote these words in her Preface to Untrodden Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys. A Midsummer Ramble in the Dolomites, her account of a trip in the mountains with a friend, Lucy Renshawe, published in 1873. A Victorian traveller and Egyptologist, Edwards is much more famous for her journey to the Nile and the books she wrote about Egypt and its archaeological treasures, A Thousand Miles up the Nile (1877) and Pharaohs, Fellahs and Explorers (1891). Edwards became an eminent Egyptologist, she lectured on Egyptian history, religion and arts in the USA, she was the founder of the Egypt Exploration Fund (1882) and her volumes were best-sellers at the time. Like her account of her journey to Egypt, Untrodden Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys is an interesting example of the author's writing abilities; many retraceable social and cultural discourses permeate the book and the contamination of literary and scientific languages is implicit in its linguistic texture. In order to create her narrative world Edwards uses specific textual typology features and paratextual elements, and exploits rhetorical strategies common in travel literature, especially written by women. The author clearly follows specific genre conventions and adapts her register according to the different sections of the volume and the addressed topics. By intermingling objective observations with subjective thoughts she creates an hybrid scientific/emotional text. In her narrative choices, Edwards was referring to a tradition of women travellers, the 'Ladies of the

Grand Tour' that Brian Dolan describes so well in his volume, women writing about voyages, adventures and self-discovery. *Untrodden Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys* depicts the efforts and achievements of two Victorian women climbers wandering alone in the Alps. Some others did it before them: Mrs Henry Warwick Cole wrote *A Lady's Tour of Monte Rosa* in 1859; Mrs Henry Freshfield published *A Summer Tour in the Grisons and the Italian Valleys of the Bernina* in 1862; Elizabeth Tuckett is known for her *Zigzagging amongst the Dolomites* (1871); Frederica Louise Edith Plunkett is remembered for *Here and There among the Alps* (1875) whilst Emily Hornby's 1907 *Mountaineering Records* was published posthumous. These women have been called 'Literary minded women alpinists'. Some years before, in 1857, 'The British Alpine Club' was founded, whereas its feminine counterpart 'The Ladies' Alpine Club', was founded only in 1907 after a certain number of women had already climbed the Alps, but women were still regarded with contempt as it happened for the exploration of domains reserved to men. Only a few years later, in 1913, women were allowed in the Royal Geographic Society but patronizing attitudes towards them were very common in the newspapers of the time: *Punch* for example, was full of caricatures of women climbers. In climbing mountains they deconstructed the ideal of femininity, 'The Cult of True Womanhood' of their time, and proposed an image of strong women, with robust health and strenuous physical activity.

Today we do not talk much about Edwards: she is almost a forgotten author but, as many women writers of that time, she was a prolific novelist. She is usually referred to as a sensationalist novelist due to her successful ghost stories, but she is also remembered as an ardent advocate of women's rights working for the women's suffrage. Thinking that women

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needed to undertake a personal journey of independence and strength, Edwards followed her own advice and gave herself an exciting life as an adventurer, travel writer and, in her mature age, as an archaeologist. She travelled to remote and unknown places often in difficult conditions and we understand this freedom of spirit from her willingness to make the first ascent (ascenzione she writes) to Sasso Bianco⁵, a still unexplored place at that time. From the moment she is aware of the existence of a never climbed mountain, the place is invested of a 'special interest', it acquires a 'halo' round its summit. The idea to go off the beaten track and be the first lady to climb it becomes too irresistible for her and she has to accomplish the task. Edward's interest and curiosity for foreign places and cultures is witnessed by her early attempts as a writer: her first travel book published in 1862 was in fact a children's picture book about Belgium and she widely contributed to many magazines and journals among which The Chambers's Journal, Eliza Cook's Journal, Literary World and The Ladies's Companion⁶. She also published three small books of etiquette, school textbooks, catalogues for exhibitions, an opera libretto and a history book, A Summary of English History (1856); she definitely was a prolific and polyhedral writer.

At the time the trip to the Dolomites was not an easy travel, a 'ramble' as she entitled it following the example of many ladies' travel accounts, and very few people had visited these mountains. The only book on the place was Joshua Gilbert and George Cheetham Churchill's The Dolomites Mountains Excursions through Tyrol, Carinthe, Carniola and Friuli 1861-1863 that the author repeatedly refers to in her own book⁷. Gilbert was a famous artist and Churchill a botanist, and as a matter of fact their


volume is filled with observations and descriptions of the plants, minerals, landscape of the Alps. Edwards inserts the two authors in her book to function as authorities, “testimonials” of the difficulty of such enterprise for a lady while, at the same time, uniting her name to their own in order to acquire authority as a climber herself. She uses the same technique with another famous alpinist, Francis Ford Tuckett, who becomes one of the many sources to support Amelia’s assertions in the text. Moreover, Edwards acknowledges her familiarity with representations of the Dolomites made by painters, travellers, climbers and scientists alluding to them in-between the lines or inserting them to add authority and objectivity to her own account. Verbal and visual descriptions go hand in hand and are thought for a scientific community interested in the geological and natural world of the Italian Alps.

In the area Edwards is still remembered among the early climbers, her volume has been translated into Italian and some pages can be also found in a tourist book about the Dolomites that can be included in the literary tourism genre. Edwards, well aware of her public, approaches the intended “discourse community” and articulates her discourses with a specific number of codified communicative text forms or genres, employing various domain-specific lexis like geology, geography, botanic, arts, architecture and literature. As Robert Alain de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler affirm, “the appropriateness of a text lies in the agreement between its setting and the ways in which the standards of textuality are upheld.” As a result, discourses are shaped

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by the producer's need to comply with the rhetorical expectations of the research community they are addressed to. Edwards's text perfectly fits the rhetorical expectations of the research community it is addressed to, who are mainly armchair or women travellers. It offers a rich and challenging contamination between scientific and literary languages, different textual typologies like tourism texts, travel accounts and geographical studies together with the insertion of visual elements like sketches and engravings and the intermingling of different linguistic registers.

The informative function which permeates some parts of the text - almost journalistic - aims at presenting an objective account of personal events through a detached point of view reiterated by the use of precise thematic and lexical choices. Edwards's author-centred discourse portrays her subjective states and psychological processes through specific rhetorical strategies: firstly, the author introduces some indexes of modesty and humility opening with a Preface where she undervalues her enterprises. From the Preface onwards we realize that the text is a good example of a perfectly constructed literary product. Secondly, she inserts eye-witness forms in two ways: a) naming other travellers present at the reported event and utilised as testimony; a strategy made clear through the use of the plural pronoun 'we'; b) using the technique of 'testimony' in order to refer to travellers who had visited the area previously and this is evident in the insertion of many intertextual allusions to literary sources. Thirdly, she introduces some practical examples that can confirm her theories adding, through this device, some social colour to the geographical and geological descriptions.

The author's intention is to present the account of a difficult and out-of-the-ordinary trip where the two women travelled in rough conditions, as the reader immediately understands:

Even now the general public is so slightly informed upon the subject that it is by no means uncommon to find educated persons who have never heard of the Dolomites at all, who take them for a religious sect, like the Mormons or the Druses. Nor is it surprising when we consider the nature of the ground lying within the area just named; the absence of roads; the impossibility of traversing the heart of the country, except on foot or by mule-back; the tedious postal arrangements; the want of telegraphic communication; and the primitive quality of accommodation for travellers. (Untrodden Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys, cit., xix-xxx)

In the Preface, Edwards gives much practical information, like for example, the need to hire side-saddles for ladies; she offers useful direc-
tions to future travellers on how to get to the places and she explores the origins of the mountains or their names. She also offers some hints on the languages one should know to communicate while travelling in those regions and outlines some information a climber should know, like for example, the safest routes or the knowledge about the weather that could suddenly change. All these practical hints for travellers are given in a very entertaining way. Moreover, at the very beginning of the text, the author introduces declarations of modesty and under-evaluating statements about her own role, which were common elements in the Prefaces written by women travellers. Edwards intermingles descriptive parts with lyrical ones and she introduces humorous sketches, a common feature of eighteenth-century travel writing where ‘sublime’ descriptions were followed by ironical passages on events of everyday life. Edwards’s text offers an interesting contamination of scientific accounts and humorous sketches where scientific details are given in an argumentative register while social and cultural accounts are translated through irony reminding Charles Dickens’s his ability for caricatures. One example of caricature can be traced in the portrayal of the German woman traveller defined as “the Phenomenon”. Edwards de-sexes, even dehumanizes this woman, utilizing the neuter ‘it’ instead of the feminine pronoun ‘she’. The author de-genders the feminine character describing her voice as “the voice of a man” and portrays her as “babbling” in a long and comical monologue which she defines as a “tremendous peroration”. In so doing not only does Edwards insert the humorous sketch, but she also distances herself from the eccentric woman, an eccentricity she probably felt for herself and her way of life but which she wanted to erase in her readers’ mind and eyes. The author wants to propose a different portrayal of herself, an image of a daring and adventurous but educated and socially acceptable English middle-class woman. Notwithstanding this, in the text Edwards

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ironizes also about her persona, for example, in all the accounts of the difficult relationship with her stubborn mule (compared to the peaceful mule of Lucy), which are exhilarating. It is evident that Edwards is a capable reporter of daily life events and she is able to document the reader about her time with Lucy, talking about how they make a good English tea in the mountains or stroll curiously around places looking at local people. We find rich details about food, clothes, children, family life, all themes that could be interesting for women readers at that time\(^\text{16}\). Edwards describes her travel meticulously, explaining to the reader the time of departures and arrivals, the hours spent walking, climbing, riding and talking to local people.

Edwards also explains she is not mapping places, or measuring natural features or circumscribing the natural world as many men travellers did before her, but she is simply introducing new places to the reader. She asserts to be struck by the immense beauty of these mountains and not interested at all in giving data about sizes, shape or any kind of scientific measurement. However, she does label flora and fauna renaming the natural world through Linnaean typologies and Latin names for plants, and interestingly, when scientific data are given in passages where a purely documentary function prevails, they are not based on the author’s direct observation, but derived from some external, authoritative source, usually a well-known British climber. What strikes more is Edwards’s great ability in describing scenes and moods carefully recording her own impressions of places and people. This is achieved also through the insertion of Italian words or terms in dialects, culture-bound terms that render the exoticism and ‘otherness’ of the place. Thanks to this strategy Edwards adds authenticity to her descriptions and makes explicit her interest in language, which she manifested also in her work as a translator. Not only does she devote some pages to the history of languages in the area, especially Ladin, but she shows excellent linguistic skills in creating her narrative world where author, narrator and reader dialogue together. She creates a narrative persona choosing, according to the sections and content of the chapter, a different pronoun, she describes events in the first person and frequently reports her own feelings, thoughts and actions, reflecting in this way another typical rhetorical feature of eighteenth-century epistolary scientific articles. It is clear that

the information reported in her texts is based, for the most part, on
her personal and detailed observation. Her subject-oriented approach to
narration, though, results in stressing the relativity of her point of view,
outlining her position as a “non mountaineer”\(^{17}\). The author proclaims
herself as “Unscientific observer”\(^{18}\), and states to be merely a writer who
observes critically. Consequently she utilizes the pronoun ‘you’ in order
to involve the reader and creating an informal colloquial register and
chooses an emphatic language, highly evaluative through the use of
emphasisers and superlative forms, thus extolling the positive features
of the described places. The book, however, unveils the author’s inability
to escape from gendered language, like for example, in the following
‘personification’ of mountains as ‘queen’ or ‘king’:

> The one is all grace and symmetry, the other massiveness and strength. It is possible
to associate the idea of fragility with the Civita. It is possible to conceive how
that exquisite perpendicular screen with thousands of slender pinnacles might be
shivered by any great convulsion of Nature; but the Pelmo looks as if rooted in the
heart of the globe itself, immovable till the day of the last disruption\(^{19}\).

Certainly the idea of ‘possibility’ and the use of the impersonal form
also implies a different perception of the subject.

Moreover, Edwards possesses a ‘visual sense’ and is able to sketch
with great accuracy, in fact Untrodden Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys
presents many illustrations where the capacity to delineate contours, mountain shapes, features of the pastoral landscape and architectonic peculiarities is evident. Details are so vivid that her sketches perfectly
mirror her words on the page. Edwards has been defined as a verbal
painter keeping in mind her picturesque style where detailed observa-
tions make an harmonious picturesque composition\(^{20}\). The picturesque
mode of representation was a common choice for Victorian women
travel writers: their accounts “seem to draw on visual images”\(^{21}\), as if
words were not sufficient to translate emotions and impressions. Actu-

\(^{17}\) Edwards A., Untrodden Peaks, cit., p. 144.
\(^{18}\) Edwards A., Untrodden Peaks cit., p. 255.
\(^{19}\) Edwards A., Untrodden Peaks, cit., p. 186.
ally, sketching, drawing and the display of technical artistic knowledge were considered appropriate accomplishments for the Victorian woman. Moreover, as Shirley Foster and Sara Mills suggest,

the picturesque also involved a certain strategy of textual description which some women found useful; it allowed them to assert that they were not organising the accounts of their travels at all but were simply amassing detail of the objects and sights which they had seen to give an overall impression of the country."^{22}

The picturesque was perfect to arouse the reader’s interest in the beauty of a particular geographical location.^{23} When publishing this book Edwards was not the famous scholar in Egyptology she would become later in her life, but she was praised for it; a review in *The Rock*, 31 October 1873, reported: “our authoress is quite a match for Mr Ruskin without a particle of his egotism or cynicism."^{24} While Ruskin talked about the aesthetics of mountains in *Modern Painters* and *Sesame and Lilies* where he carefully describes the Cervino (i.e. the Matterhorn) and the Alps, ‘the great cathedrals of the earth’,^{25} for Edwards they are wonders to be looked at and revered, as Leslie Stephen, a known mountaineer in the Alps, affirmed in *The Playground of Europe* too.^{26} However, while Stephen believed sublimity was due to the elevation of the mind, in her allusions to his text, Edwards criticizes the ideas and individualism of the male mountaineer and presents the different engagement of the woman climber.^{27} Furthermore, in Edward’s text the picturesque goes hand in hand with the gothic, a genre that greatly utilized images of mountains, secluded places, forgotten treasures, and hidden castles. In these passages the author chooses metaphors connected to semantic fields of magic, dreaming and fairy tales. Travellers feel to be “under the dominion of some dreadful spell”.^{28} Not surprisingly, given the author’s capacity to sketch and her love for painting, in the text the representation of the

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alpine world is made also through intertextual reference to visual arts. Edwards offers many information about arts in the Dolomites, begin-
ning from the peculiarity of Italian Northern architecture (which she also draws), Titian's presence in the area and the beautiful paintings she saw in many churches. Numerous allusions are made to painters, like for example, Albrecht Dürer29, and these are used as a parameter of excellent capability that the author cannot achieve in portraying these places. However, in her humble presentation as an artist, Edwards inserts sketches and engravings demonstrating her abilities. Linguistic choices are strictly correlated to these sketches as if the verbal should mirror the visual text and an architectonic terminology with terms such as "pyra-
mids", "towers" and "pinnacles" is used.

In her account of the Dolomites the writer recuperates a historical perspective of the place, so that some chapters are full of local history where she discusses the complex relationship between Italians and Austrians at that time while emphasising the courage of the two women travellers to pass national frontiers that were recently made. She recovers the history of noble families and feudal structures that not only gives a historical and cultural perspective but enables her to counterpose the positiveness of the English middle class, its strength in being active and laborious when compared to the laziness of the Italian aristocracy. Through these references to Italian history and culture the author fills the text with allusions to British society, embedded in Positivism, scientific improvements and Protestant values, which are put in comparison with the nega-
tivity of Catholicism, religious beliefs and superstitions. In this sense she is a faithful 'daughter' of the Empire emphasising British superiority and reproducing stereotyped images of inhabitants of the places she visits. Geographical descriptions intermingle with scientific details and anthropological references and offer culture-bound representations of the described places and people. She writes on the page her sense of English superiority and national pride, because only an English woman could travel alone in such difficult conditions. This sense of superior culture is accompanied by class distinctions which she makes clear all through the text as if an unbridgeable immense gap is always visible between Italian peasant women and the English middle class travellers30. As William Bainbridge has underlined, the volume is permeated by British natural,

aesthetic and cultural values\textsuperscript{31}. Italian women are depicted as "savages" and compared to "uncivilised aboriginal Australians"\textsuperscript{32}. It is clear that the author is fully aware of her readers' expectations and eager to find the portrait of an uncommon English woman, but nonetheless representative of their own culture.

The volume offers a strict relationship between the form and content of opinions by a woman traveller who knows she will not be taken seriously by people interested in mountaineering or even reviewed with criticism, as it happened with The Atheneum where she was dismissed as the real author\textsuperscript{33}. The text is constructed utilising specific narrative structures, genres and rhetorical strategies common in travelogues but adds to this mastery of textual typologies her personal ability as a creative writer and artist. The reader can understand that Edwards is a highly skilled writer who uses travel literature textual typologies and linguistic registers in her own way, creating appealing and unique texts, in fact, in her account the Alps become a palimpsest for the tourist, a map where future travellers can read a different story, the territory itself becomes a narration. Amelia Edwards introduces many interesting issues connected to the history and culture of the area, but she is unable to escape from her own background and culture as many discourses of the Victorian social, literary, cultural context intersect in the text. The book offers a controversial culture-bound representations of the described places and their inhabitants from a late-Victorian perspective by an author known as a 'free spirit' but who seems too deeply embedded in the ideology of her time, unable to escape from it. However, her sketching, naming and representing the Dolomites certainly has the power to create landscapes with words as she was willing to do.