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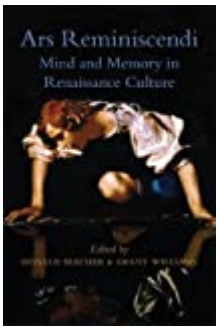

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The Art of Recollection and Renaissance Memory

Once upon a time, the poet Simonides of Ceos (557-467 BCE) delivered a panegyric at the banquet of a rich nobleman. Following common practice, the patron's praise was coupled with the praise of a deity; in this case, the twin gods Castor and Pollux (the Dioscuri). The stingy nobleman informed the bard he would pay him only half the price for the commissioned poem, and that he should ask the twins to pay the rest, since he had awarded them half the commissioned praise. Such mythological acts of meanness rarely go unpunished, and so, soon after, as the banquet was underway, a message was brought to Simonides that two young men were awaiting him outside. Castor and Pollux were no longer there when the poet stepped outside, but as he did so the roof over the banquet hall collapsed, killing the ungracious host and his unfortunate guests. The fairy tale account of Simonides's divine rescue might not have been handed down had it not been for the story's second part, which is the foundation myth of the art of memory. The distraught relatives of the banquet's victims were eager to award their loved ones their due funerary rites, but the dead had been so badly disfigured that they could no longer be identified. Simonides was able to relocate each diner to the place where he had been seated, thus inaugurating the mnemonic technique of according mnemonic images to mental places (*topoi*/*loci*)–as well as earning a handsome commission for his mnemonic service.

Renaissance readers knew this starting point from Cicero's influential treatise *De Oratore* (55 BCE). It posits classical mnemonic techniques in antiquity and later in a rhetorical context. Memory, the fourth part of rhetoric (after invention, disposition, and elocution), was a basic requirement for ancient orators, who were expected to deliver speeches by heart. Rhetorical treatises, such as the pseudo-Ciceronian *Ad Herennium* (first century BCE) suggested that the orator locate striking mental images to remind him of the things he was meant to memorize (forensic evidence, rhetorical tropes, and so on) within a mental edifice–most commonly a mental picture of an actual building well known to the memorizer. This theme had many variations, with some seeing it as a wonder-working form of artificial memory, and oth-

ers more skeptical about the virtues of artificial memory. The images could either be striking–grotesquely humorous, cruel, or otherwise memorable–or more lean, and the places range from recommendations for a fairly simple local system to the contested claim of Metrodorus of Scepsis (c. 145-170 BCE) to be able to use the zodiac as his elaborate *loci* system.

A fairly neglected aspect of western intellectual history, the art of memory has benefited from the scholarly attention it deserves in recent decades, most famously in Frances Yates's beautiful *The Art of Memory* (1966), which re-established the art's central position in antique and high medieval learned practices and conceptions of the human mind, described its moralization in the high Middle Ages as memory was acknowledged as part of the secondary virtue of prudence, and, most significantly, traced the occult reconstruction of the art in Renaissance thought with Giulio Camillo's mnemonic theater and *L'idea del theatro* (completed in 1544) and Giordano Bruno's more radical occultization of the art, developing in tandem with Pierre de la RamÃ©e's (Ramus) "ascetic" dialectics, evocatively portrayed by Yates as an act of internal iconoclasm. Significant as the occult aspects of Renaissance mnemonics are, as Yates herself acknowledged, these reveal but a fraction of the role and significance of mnemonics in Renaissance culture. Though valuable work has been done on the subject since, rewarding work on Renaissance memory and mnemonics remains to be carried out. The present volume, based on a 2006 conference, offers sixteen essays on a broad spectrum of Renaissance memory, followed by a detailed overview by Donald Beecher. It aims primarily to offer a consideration of broader aspects of mnemonics in their rhetorical, literary, political, and psychological contexts in the Renaissance. Such an attempt at gauging the broader significance and cultural validity of mnemonic techniques and attitudes is, needless to say, highly welcome. Many contributions offer thought-provoking discussions of various test cases–and in some cases point at fecund stretches of arable land waiting to be ploughed. Conversely, precisely because of the pervasiveness of memory (if not mnemonics) in any culture, the historian, as Beecher rightly cautions in his introduction, must draw some distinctions, lest everything becomes memory, and the term lose any heuristic value. Most of the contributors heed this caution. Still, the degree to which various Renaissance phenomena shed light on, and are explained by, mnemonic habits is a question that allows for a legitimate difference of opinion. While the essays included in this volume are interesting and worth reading in their own right, I find some more convincing than others as guides to mnemonic arts and habits.

The first section, "Revisioning the Classical Art of Memory," opens with Brenda Dunn-Lardeau's discussion of Jehan du PrÃ©'s *Palais des nobles Dames* (1534). An interesting discussion of du PrÃ©'s work in its own right, this article indicates a mnemonic substratum of the work but does not, to my understanding, offer a consideration of the art of memory, or the ways in which its employment in this work relates to the tradition or the revision of the art. Andrea Torre, considering the uses of images as referential and metaphoric accompaniments of texts, concentrates on three Italian texts of the late fifteenth, late sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries–three mnemonic treatises of various cultural backgrounds that remind us of the various Renaissance social contexts where such skills would be required, such as among preachers, merchants, and orators. *Il memoriale*, by Emanuele Tesauro (1592-1675), a text discussed by Torre, offers a case of a distinctly non-classical choice of *loci*: the etymologies of the stigmata (*plaga*) as a metaphoric model of memory. The section ends with Wolfgang Neuber's thought-provoking argument on the link between mnemonic imagery and early modern collective memory. Pivoting on the mnemotechnical injunction to forge striking, cruel, or comic mnemonic images, Neuber considers the construction of New World cannibalism in sixteenth-century German woodcuts. Although the "savages" not only acquired a cruel, and therefore mnemonically successful image, these texts also posited the Americas as part of real and imaginable postlapsarian reality, rather than a mnemonically pallid paradisiacal utopia, so that the immanence of profane human phenomena, Neuber argues, was being asserted: "Not only the visual images of mnemonic treatises, but also the structural principles of mnemonics can be held responsible for the formation of a collective memory" (p. 80). Whether or not one agrees, this essay offers much to think about.

The second section is dedicated to manuscripts, commonplace books, and personal recollection. James Nelson Novoa discusses and offers a transliteration and English translation of a short Sephardic art of memory, or possibly a sketch of what was meant to be a more elaborate manual. The fifteenth-century Jewish mnemonic treatise (written in Castilian using Hebrew letters) is not perhaps striking in its own right–interestingly, it is devoid of any Jewish (for instance: Kabbalist) elements, and while demonstrating up-to-date classical and scholastic learning (itself an interesting fact) is not original. Novoa, however, offers us a rewarding glance both at the decid-

edly unheroic trappings of fifteenth-century mnemonic *Alltag*, and a glimpse at the work, however modest, of a learned member of a Jewish Iberian community in all its attentiveness to the intellectual currents of its Christian surroundings–shortly before it was to be consigned to the past. Kenneth Bartlett discusses the travel journal of Thomas Hobys (1530-66). The learned Elizabethan courtier and urbane admirer of Italian culture undertook two journeys to Italy, and composed a travel diary, which remained in manuscript, and was in all likelihood meant for his son, Edward. This highly stylized account, Bartlett demonstrates, is not an authentic recollection of his Italian experiences, but a later literary construction, merging genuine recollection with classical erudition, and, most importantly, extensive unacknowledged translations of *Descrittione di tutta Italia* by Leonardo Alberti (1479-c.1552). For Hoby, Bartlett suggests, memory was a literary construct meant to establish his own uniqueness and authority. Perhaps, as Bartlett suggests, Hoby's genuine memories and Alberti's work were not clearly distinguished for Hoby or other Renaissance diarists. Victoria Burke probes the complex relationship between commonplace books and memory. Were commonplace books a superficial collection of snippets, avoiding an internalization of moral precepts? Or were they to some extent mnemonic props? Considering a broad spectrum of commonplace usages among different strands of seventeenth-century society, Burke offers a rewarding consideration of the complex and ambivalent role and social standing of commonplace books among a broad spectrum of seventeenth-century society, and points to their important gender aspects.

The third section, "Learning, Rhetoric, and the Humanist Challenge," opens with Paul Nelles's study of Conrad Gessner's *Bibliotheca Universalis* (1545) and *Pandecta* (1548) as Renaissance Melanchthonian *loci communes* attempts at digesting and sorting the vast library of sixteenth-century learning. Unlike the print-manuscript dichotomy in much of modern scholarship, describing a transfer from a culture of memory to a culture of documentation, Nelles argues through the case of Gessner for a more porous relationship. For Gessner the culture of the book was rooted in mnemonic culture: memory as an adjunct of logic–fixing knowledge in its place. Within the context of the humanist stress on memory, as opposed to the Cartesian stress on reason, John Hunter's "The Well-Stocked Memory and Well-Tended Self: Erasmus and the Limits of Humanist Education" considers Erasmus's stress on memory as part of the learned self and the learned care for one's mental well-being and stability, stemming from the pedagogical need to shield pupils from the explosion of printed knowledge. The dilemmas of coping with so much information and containing it within accessible memory–at one's fingertips–were a measure of real internalization of knowledge. Hunter identifies echoes of a corresponding crisis of humanist education in Christopher Marlowe's *Faustus* (1589) and in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c. 1599-1601)–the discrepancy between accumulated knowledge and will. Marie-Alice Belle, in one of the finest contributions to the volume, examines Johann Sturm's use of figurative drafts as part of his mnemonic instruction, which merges Aristotelian concepts of memory as storehouse of images, and the Platonic theory of recollection, positing Sturm's mnemonic pedagogical theories between traditional Renaissance pedagogy and Ramist dismissal of Aristotle and figures: "Sturm's method fulfills the implication of Aristotle's analysis of the workings of memory as inference, or induction: only, it shifts the traditional principle of organizing mnemonic images by serial order, on which Classical and Medieval practices of the art of memory relied, towards an order based on the induction of rhetorical or logical types" (p. 205). This method was a rationalization of the art of memory leading students, through a convergence of Aristotelian dialectics and Platonic reminiscence, to partake in the divine order of the world.

In the interesting fourth section, Raymond Waddington and Andrew Wallace consider the role of memory in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Waddington considers the mnemonic aspect of *Paradise Lost* and the dire consequences of forgetfulness in the epic. Like the Bible, it is a "narrative of recollection ... designed to enable and deepen the reader's memory of Christian truths" (p. 217). The epic's figures, Satan, Adam, and Eve, have the mnemonic freedom (in fact necessity) to depart from the original *loci* and occupy new ones. Wallace scrutinizes the theater scene in *Hamlet,* "What's Hecuba to him?" considered against the backdrop of rote memorization, translation, and re-Latinization of Virgil in Elizabethan classrooms, reflected in the scene. Rote memorizing, though it has had bad press in modern times, was also linked to sympathetic imagination. Wallace relates this mnemonic incident to Hamlet's tackling of the problem of the communicability of experience. Hamlet's exchange with the first actor reflects on the one hand the mnemonic practice of Elizabethan classrooms and that of the stage. These, as Wallace points out, are two very different mnemonic settings: actors had only their own lines to memorize and

their mnemonic exertion was not a shared experience but a fragmented memorization–the first rehearsal, as in the famous scene, was something of an epiphany, where it all formed a coherent mosaic.

In the fifth section, Joseph Khoury, DaniÃ¨le Letocha, and Christopher Ivic consider the role of Renaissance memory in national historiography and cultural identity. Khoury discusses Machiavelli's concept of memory as a political civic tool; that is, history as a manipulated account of the past designed to control the political present. Khoury considers the role of terror in Machiavelli's political understanding of history–a terror needed to keep members of the commonwealth in general, and a republic in particular, under rein. Letocha scrutinizes Conrad Celtis's *Ingolstadt Oration* (1492). Letocha is no doubt right in identifying the general humanist nexus of cultural forgetfulness (of the Helleno-Roman tradition) as a cause of cultural decay, and therefore the link in humanist thought between memory and an imagined "return to the sources." A concentration, however, on the 1492 *Oration* is perhaps not the best platform for a consideration of memory in Celtis's thought, and Letocha'a stress on the contradiction between Celtis's Latinity and Germanic nostalgia is to my mind unconvincing. Christopher Ivic offers an interesting analysis of Edmund Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (written 1593; published 1633) from the standpoint of memory and forgetfulness. The English colonialists' forgetting of themselves, analogous to that of the knight Verdant in Acasia's Tower of Bliss in the *Faerie Queen* (1590-96), requires for Spenser a restoration of one's memory of oneself through external agents. Forgetting is here linked with failed social performance. Spenser advocates a reform of Irish society "in a way that will force the Irish to forget themselves" (p. 303).

In the final section, "Natural memory vs. Artificial Recollection," Grant Williams and Rhodri Lewis consider different aspects of natural and artificial memory in early modern natural philosophy in two highly interesting articles. Williams, in a forceful and at times convoluted essay, argues for the transmateriality of early modern psychological concepts of memory. This is a highly interesting argument about early modern natural philosophers' understanding of the mechanics of memory and recollection. To a layman like myself, the argument about early modern memory-materiality paranoia, though in itself rich (trans)material for thought, seems overstated. Lewis concludes the section with a highly rewarding account of memory and mnemotechnique in the early Royal Society, focusing on Robert Hooke. Mnemotechniques–as Rhodri pointedly remarks–are not an art of memory (*ars memoriae*) but an art of recollection (*ars reminiscendi*). Offering a sketch of seventeenth-century natural philosophers' grappling with memory and the artificial art of recollection, this purview is also instructive on the intricate philosophical, moral, and religious dilemmas introduced in the seventeenth century by changing concepts of the soul. The volume concludes with a lengthy and detailed postscript by Donald Beecher, offering an overview of the wide range of topics considered in the volume and concluding with suggestions for future studies of the *ars reminiscendi*.

Despite my occasional disagreement with this or that application of memory in some of the volume's essays, this collection makes a welcome contribution to the study of Renaissance memory, and among its essays readers will find much that is worth recollecting.

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