

Inventional Mnemonics and the Ornaments of Style: The Case of Etymology*

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In the first issue of *Connotations*, William Engel argued for the importance of what he called “mnemonic criticism” in the study of Renaissance literature. I was pleased to see his essay, since it corroborated work that I had completed on the importance of mnemonic technique in late antiquity and in learned medieval literary culture.¹ Engel’s interesting citations from sixteenth and seventeenth century Emblem books show how fundamental mnemotechnique was considered to be in the work of confession, pious meditation, and ethical “reading” generally at this time.

One limitation of the essay, however, is that it gives the impression (as does Frances Yates’ work on the subject) that learned mnemonics are a development only of “the art of memory” described in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, the “artificial memory” scheme of places and images. Engel also leaves the strong impression, as Yates did, that interest in mnemonics is to be identified with Neoplatonism.² My own researches in a wide range of medieval literatures from late antiquity through the late 15th century indicates that this is much too narrow a characterization.

“Mnemonic criticism” is not one “approach” among many to the *interpretation* of literature (as Engel’s term might imply) but was a fundamental feature of ancient and medieval art, since it was basic both to elementary pedagogy and to all meditative composition (as though there were any other kind).³ It is not particular to any ancient philosophic “school,” though the reifying of mnemonics, objectified as

*Reference: William E. Engel, “Mnemonic Criticism & Renaissance Literature: A Manifesto,” *Connotations* 1.1 (1991): 12-33.

a “clavis” to universal knowledge, may be particular to some forms of Renaissance Neoplatonism.⁴ Medieval mnemonics is a *technique*, a tool for thinking and inventing. In this essay, I would like to suggest how some of the rudiments of mnemonic technique underlie one principle category of the “ornaments of style,” *etymologia*. I will suggest that such “ornaments” were cultivated in the various arts as delightful and *useful* tools, both for remembering and for further inventing. I will propose that an “ornament of style” be considered the literary equivalent of such other inventional features as page lay-out in books, and arches and columns in buildings—features often also called decorative or ornamental, and thought now to be neither functional nor essential in art.

Jacopo da Varagine (Dominican friar, Bishop of Genoa, and compiler, in the mid-thirteenth century, of the immensely popular anthology of saints’ lives called *The Golden Legend*) prefaced his account of the life of St. Cecilia with an “etymology” of her name. When Chaucer translated the legend as the tale of the Second Nun, he included the etymology as preface to the story. Evidently he considered it to be an important introduction. Most modern students find it embarrassingly “medieval,” and far too long. Here it is, translated from the Latin:

Cecilia is as though [quasi] “lily of heaven” [celi lilia] or “way of the blind” [cecis via] or from “heaven” [celo] and “Leah” [lya]. Or “Cecilia” is as though “free of blindness” [cecitate carens]. Or she is named from heaven [celo] and “leos,” that is “people.” For she was a “lily of heaven” because of her virgin chastity. Or she is called “lily” because she had the white of purity, the green of conscience, the odor of good fame. She was “way of the blind” because of her teaching by example, “heaven” for her devoted contemplation, “Leah” for her constant business. Or she is called “heaven” because, as Isidore says, the scientists have said that heaven is swift, round, and burning. So also she was swift through her solicitous work, round through her perspicuity, burning through her flaming love. She also was “free of blindness” because of the brilliant light of her wisdom. She was also “heaven of people” [celum + leos] because in her, as in a heaven, people wanting a role-model might in a spiritual way gaze upon her sun, moon, and stars, that is the far-sightedness of her wisdom, the greatness of her faith, and the variety of her virtues.⁵

A grumpy note in modern editions of Chaucer points out that these etymologies are all “false.” And indeed they all are, according to modern

suppositions of what an etymology should be. What we mean when we say these etymologies are “false” is that they are not historically verifiable, and therefore, that they do not “really and truly” have anything to do with how the name “Cecilia” came into being as a historically-conditioned “object.” But suppose for a moment that there might have existed cultures for whom the question of “verifiable” historical origin was less important than other matters—such as what can I *make from* the name and life of this saint? Or (a variation of the same) how can I internalize, “make my own,” the virtues and qualities exemplified in this saint’s life? That is also a form of “remembering” Cecilia, though it isn’t what most moderns think of when they consider “memory.”⁶

Jacopo’s etymologies of the name Cecilia resolve themselves into a series of homophonies, puns on the syllables of her name, and images derived from those puns that serve as mnemonics for some of her virtues. “Ce-ci-li-a” *sounds like* “caeca” and “lilia,” or like “caeci” and “via,” and so on. Lilies—at least for audiences used to seeing them painted in images of the Virgin and described in sermons—are white, with green stems and a sweet scent. Semantics is banished in favor of sounds, a play of coincident likenesses and oppositions: ce-ci-li-a is “like” [quasi] “lilia” and “via” and “Lya,” like “caelum” and “caecus,” because the syllables of her name *sound like* those words—sort of [quasi]. Such associative play is the method of the game of Charades. It is also the fundamental stuff of remembering.

But why, one must ask, would anyone go to the length of making up these elaborately punning riffs of memory, that do to a word what jazz does to a written musical phrase—just to remember a name? Isn’t it easier and faster to memorize the name itself? Well—it depends on what you want to remember something *for*. It is a matter of how you want to *use* it.

If all you want is to be able to call up a word, then probably simple repetition is fine (unless for some reason you think you will have trouble recalling it later). But suppose you wanted more than that—suppose your objective was to meditate on the virtues of the saint for ethical purposes, “ad imitandum,” as indeed Jacopo’s text invites you to do. Suppose you weren’t really interested at all in the historical “object”

that was St. Cecilia, let alone in the "verifiable" derivation of her name, but instead in "turning" her example into an ethically fruitful meditation about her life in relation to your own. In that case, the mechanism for such literary "turning" would be called a trope, your meditational exercise would be a "tropological com-position" or "reading" (as we now call it), and the whole point would be to invent as many variations on the basic syllables of the name as your recollective ingenuity, working within your memory-store, could manage. You would be using your memory, your "associations" with the name "Cecilia" to invent a composition, very much in the manner that a performer/composer of music uses a phrase (or "trope") as the foundation for "inventions."

Memory, not imagination, is the inventional faculty, both for antiquity and for the Middle Ages. That is how invention was taught in school and practiced in life. The imagination makes images, but memory both puts them away and hauls them out again, not as "random objects" but as parts of a construction, a network, a web, a texture of associations.

One fundamental problem with paying more attention to scholastic analyses of *memoria*, as intellectual histories have tended to do, than to the practices and results of inventional mnemonics is that definitional analyses of memory seem to require splitting up an activity that is simultaneous into separate "faculties," one that stores and one that recollects. But practical mnemonic techniques address storing and retrieving as the same activity, as a single "inventive" process of remembering which both "stores things away" and "finds things out."

Moreover, what people remember is not "objects" but inventively valuable *images*, consciously set into heuristic schemes. These images result from external and internal sensory traces "translated" by imagination (the activity that makes them into images) and impressed on memory, in the way that the images-of-"things," in the form of words or other signs, are drawn onto a wax tablet. Such memory-graphs have meaning not in themselves, but as parts of an intricate invention machine. And, like all machines, it is only as "good," as useful, as the person, the "engine" or ingenuity, operating it.

Inventively remembered, the name Cecilia is treated as a gathering place, a "common place" or com-position, into which material of various sorts has been "gathered" by a "chain" of punning associations. This

fundamental inventional tool is as well a fundamental mnemonic technique. Why should one wish to remember Cecilia? Not in order “to know the facts” about her, but to “re-member” her story, by re-telling it in our own selves, in literary, ethical meditation. Reading, says Gregory the Great, in the preface to his *Moralia in Job*, “presents a kind of mirror to the eyes of the mind, that our inner face may be seen in it. There indeed we learn our own ugliness, there *our own* beauty,” for “we should transform what we read into our very selves.”⁷ It is in that activity, the “troping” of a literary work that goes on in memory, that the “meaning” of reading resides. The moral “commonplaces” summarized in the “etymologies” that accompany Cecilia’s story should be used (if used at all) as the *beginning* of our “reading” of her story, not as definitive statements of “its meaning” (*it* has no “meaning” apart from the “fruits” the story brings forth in our recollective, inventional ruminations). And so, rightly, these associative suggestions precede the narrative.

Bernard Silvester (d. 1160?), articulating a commonplace, claims that “[e]thimologia divina aperit et practica humana regit” (etymologizing opens up divine matters and regulates human society). Commenting on this quotation, Ernst Curtius states that for Bernard etymologizing had “epistemological status,” by which Curtius meant that it had “truth status” of a sort that modern logicians might recognize. But is that Bernard’s claim? I don’t think so.

Bernard was a teacher of, among other things, rhetoric, and thus familiar with rhetoric’s terminology and pedagogic traditions, according to which *etymologia* is one of the “ornaments of style.” Curtius disparages this classification as a limitation of pre-modern literary theory, and he is hardly alone among modern commentators. After citing, in his characteristic collational fashion, dozens of examples of etymologizing from the Bible, and both Greek and Roman writers from Homer to Augustine, Curtius comments that “all I have presented so far can be taken as more or less insipid trifling.”⁸ And he tries to distinguish such trifling from “serious” etymologizing. But I think Curtius fails to recognize in himself a prejudice against “mere” ornament, as lacking—I suppose—a proper degree of Arnoldian (and Kantian) “high seriousness.”

The modern prejudice against ornament (like that against memorizing—I think they are related modern disapprovals) fails to recognize that decoration functions heuristically, providing the markers that can inventory and so “invent” the “materials” of thought. Like the “etymologies” of Cecilia which precede the story of her life, they provide mnemonically—inventionally—valuable markers that can help to orient and join up the ways that the story is “ruminated” in people’s minds. Literally heuristic, they have no meaning themselves but they can “find out” meanings, by “sprouting” and by “bearing fruit” in the schematized webs, the associational “orchards” (to finish the metaphor I began with) that “reside in” memories. (A memory not heuristically equipped was called a *silva*, a “forest” of disorganized, unretrievable junk.)

There is no point in talking about “meaning” in premodern cultures as though “it” had an existence apart from the complex of people’s memories. And so, for the process of meaning-making to begin at all, one’s memory must be “hooked up” and “hooked in” to the associational “play” of the mind at work. That is the essential function of ornament, and it explains why the basic features of the “ornaments” also are elementary principles of mnemonics: surprise and delight, exaggeration, “brevity,” orderliness and pattern, copiousness, similarity-and-contrariety. All of these characteristics are essential for making mnemonically powerful associations.

In a study of the architectural orders—“decorative elements” at their most evident—John Onians comments that by the time of the Empire, Romans “expected to scan a building and look for features, especially in the columnar organization, which would articulate it.”⁹ Roman imperial cities bristled with columns, used in part to mark their owners’ status and, in a communal context, to give addresses to the places of the city. These columns, literally and figuratively, “invented” the city as a human community, a network of places by means of which a person could find her way.

This heuristic assumption about the nature of ornament, in both architecture and literature, intensified with Christian buildings, Onians argues, and was made an essential part of the way that buildings could invite prayer, conceived of as the “common prayer” and “commonplaces” of liturgy, upon which individual meditative prayer would be a

“dilation.” So, for example, Constantine transferred the Composite order, used to mark imperial triumph, to the triumph of the new religion, when, instead of using it on his own triumphal arch as previous emperors had, he reserved it for the six spiralvine columns he had set up about the tomb of St. Peter in his new church. “It is as if Constantine, in gratitude for Christ’s aid at Milvian Bridge, decided to surrender the [Composite] order to Him. The victory was Christ’s, not the emperor’s.”¹⁰ Onians continues, “Every step taken in a Christian church, every passage in liturgy, potentially involved psychological transformations and the dramatic realization of some bold metaphor such as rebirth or salvation.”¹¹ *Potentially* is the right word—a potential that can only become actual in some person’s mind by stirring the associational inventory of a well-furnished mind. So close is the bond between memory and ethics that Prudence (also called, in the twelfth century, Sophia and Fronesis)¹² is identified in many texts with memory itself—and is in all cases said to rely on memory.¹³

The connection of etymology to mnemonic technique is clear at least from the time of Cicero, who uses the same word, *notatio*, both to translate Greek *etymologia* (*Topica* 35; cf. Quintilian, *Inst.* I.6.28) and for the mnemonically valuable “notes” or “marks” that are the tools of memory work (*De orat.* 2.358; cf. *Rhet. ad Her.* 3.34). Whatever its “truth status”—and that question was much argued in antiquity, as everyone knows—the *mnemonic* efficacy of “etymology” never was questioned. I would suggest that its standing as a valuable pedagogical practice, a sub-set of inventional mnemonics, was to a large extent independent of philosophical investigations (with differing outcomes) into the truth-value of etymologizing. I do not think that an appeal to Plato and his followers (or to Aristotle, for that matter) will suffice to account for the role of *etymologia* in either Roman or medieval pedagogy, or in the compositional habits of those trained in such schools; one should look instead to the elementary techniques, including mnemonics, for reading and composition employed in Hellenistic schools and in their medieval heirs.

One need look no farther than the *Origines*, soon dubbed the “Etymologies,” of Isidore of Seville to find an instance of the pedagogical and mnemotechnical power attributed to etymologizing. Isidore’s

encyclopedia, characterized rightly as supplying "a whole system of education,"¹⁴ begins with some etymologizing that is recognizably in the fashion of Jacopo's meditation on "Cecilia," and proceeds to exfoliate this scheme. We would never now organize an encyclopedia on such a principle as paranomasia (we prefer alphabets) but the purpose is similar: to afford a ready mental heuristic. "Disciplina a discendo nomen accepit . . . Aliter dicta disciplina, quia discitur plena": the two etymologies are proffered not as competing "explanations" whose "truth" is to be objectively determined (Isidore shows no interest at all in which of these two is correct), but rather as "starting-points" for Isidore's encyclopedic composition. The concern always to have a firm "starting-point" (which is really a "starting-off-point" for a memory chain), the pride of place given to the beginning, the "inventor," recognizes a requirement of human remembering. Isidore's pedagogy incorporated the presumption that *all* learning is built up, like a wall or a concordance, upon a memorial base of "notations" (including etymologies) that serve as recollective inventory markers.

The experiential belief in the pedagogical, compositional utility of "etymologizing" persisted in the *praxis* of monastic prayer, thence vernacularized and brought to the laity by friars like Jacopo da Varagine. Etymologizing, with other forms of paranomasia, is a persistent "ornament" of monastic composition, especially in the extensive "troping" which individual authors performed on the Name of Jesus. A good example is Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermon 15 on the *Song of Songs*, "The Name of Jesus," in which the six titles given to the Lord in Isaiah 9:6 provide the compositional *linea* or scheme for "finding out" the whole sermon. Here is a brief excerpt:

In some mysterious way the name of majesty and power is transfused into that of love and mercy, an amalgam that is abundantly poured out in the person of our Savior Jesus Christ. The name "God" liquifies and dissolves into the title "God with us," that is, into "Emmanuel." He who is "Wonderful" becomes "Counsellor"; "God" and "the Mighty One" becomes the "Everlasting Father" and the "Prince of Peace."¹⁵

In the early Renaissance, "etymology" is classified as a form of mnemonic image in an "art of memory" by Jacobus Publicius of Florence,

printed in Venice by Erhard Ratdolt in 1482 and 1485.¹⁶ Under the general category of “Notatio” are listed a variety of punning devices, including both “onamathopeya” and “etymologia.” Of the latter we are told

Knowledge of etymology greatly aids the process of discovering images and signs. If finding an image for the name “Philippus” itself appears hard to us then it will readily yield a likeness of his name by the line of etymology. It derives from [*lit. has its line from*] *philos*, that is love, and *hippos*, horse, that is a lover of horses. Hieronymus is the holy law. Jacobus is interpreted as a wrestler. Frons from *foramen* [the hollows or cells of a honeycomb].¹⁷

The etymology is primarily a mnemonic, an image that “finds out” something one wishes, for whatever reason, to recall. Counselling the mnemonic value of such puns predates the systematizing of Hellenistic education in the fourth century, B. C. It is a prominent feature of the sophist fragment (c. 400) on the art of memory, called *Dialexeis* or *Dissoi Logoi*. To remember words, the author says, one should connect them via homophonies to mental images; for example, to remember the word “pyrilampes,” which means “glow-worm,” one might connect it to a flaming torch, via *pyr*, fire, and *lampein*, shine.¹⁸

The “reality” that the etymologies of Cecilia address, then, is an operational one, that of what I am calling “intentional memory.” So when Bernard Silvester claimed that etymology “opens the way to divinity and regulates human affairs,” I do not think he meant to claim an “epistemological status” for it, in any way that we now would recognize (that is, as having “truth content” *in itself*, objectively). Etymologizing—like all the other ornaments—helps “regulate” ethical life by setting up and “setting in play” the memory machines that construct the “*practica humana*”—the materials of human lives—with wisdom and prudence (or at least they should: but “by their fruits ye shall know them”).

It “opens up” divine matters—again, through setting in motion the associational paranomasia of our memories of sacred texts, the only vehicle for the knowledge of God, as Augustine describes it, that humans can have in this life:

See how I have explored the vast field of my memory in search of you, O lord!
And I have not found you outside it . . . since the time when I first learned
of you, you have always been present in my memory, and it is there that I
find you whenever I am reminded of you and find delight in you. This is my
holy joy, which in your mercy you have given me, heedful of my poverty.¹⁹

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NOTES

¹Published in my *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990). The first edition is now revised and published in paperback (1992). This essay is excerpted from my companion study, now in preparation, on the role of "inventive mnemonics" in literary composition. I was stimulated to consider *etymologia* in this fashion, in part by reading Inge Leimberg, "'Golden Apollo, a Poor Humble Swain . . .': A study of names in *The Winter's Tale*," *ShJW* (1991): 135-58.

²Yates modified this position later, suggesting, correctly I believe, that the Neoplatonic provenance of "the art of memory" is a development of the Renaissance, a "rectifying" of technique that accompanied the objectification of knowledge at that time; see her "Architecture and the Art of Memory," *Architectural Association Quarterly* (London) 12 (1980): 4-13.

³Composition was analysed and taught as a primarily mental discipline, the preliminary stage of which, the *res*, was best carried out without the assistance of physical supports, such as tablets or paper. This is also the mental activity called meditation: hence, all composition is necessarily "meditational," in its early stages. Of course, the word "meditation" could also be applied more specifically to prayer. On mental composing and *memoria* see *The Book of Memory*, esp. 194-208.

⁴I am out of my field of expertise here, and rely for these comments on Paolo Rossi's studies of Renaissance logic and arts of memory, especially *Clavis universalis: Arti mnemoniche e logica combinatoria de Lullo a Leibnitz* (Milan: Ricciardi, 1960), Walter Ong's study of Pierre Ramus, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1958), and Gerald Bruns, *Inventions: Writing, Textuality, and Understanding in Literary History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1982). I do not mean to suggest that all Neoplatonism is of the Baconian variety, but it does seem to me, that there is a keener appreciation of the limitations of human cognition, and hence of humanly-created signs such as memory-images, in medieval writers than in some Renaissance writers on mnemotechnique. I am thinking particularly of claims like that of Guilio Camillo (1579) that *all* knowledge could be inventoried in his memory theater. In contrast, I think of St. Augustine's casual admission that his memory contains everything he has learned "except the things which I have forgotten" (*Confessions* X. 8 and 9). On the continuities and changes between late medieval and Renaissance claims for *artes memoriales*, see especially the excellent essays by Paolo Rossi ("Le arti della memoria: rinascite e trasfigurazioni" 13-34), Lina Bolzoni ("Costruire immagini: L'arte della memoria tra letteratura e arti figurative" 57-97),

and Eugenio Battisti ("Schemi geometrici, artifizii retorici, oggetti di meraviglia nel trattato quattrocentesco sulla memoria di Giovanni Fontana" 117-38), all in Lina Bolzoni and Pietro Corsi, eds., *La cultura della memoria* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992).

⁵Transcribed from Bodleian MS. Bodley 336 (early 14th c.) by G. H. Gerould, W. F. Bryan and G. Dempster, eds., *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (1941; rpt. New York: Humanities P, 1958) 671.

⁶"Memory and the Ethics of Reading" is the topic of the fifth chapter of *The Book of Memory*; my discussions of the matter here depend upon the analysis of the process I gave there. Readers unfamiliar with what I said there may wish to read it first.

⁷*Moralia in Job* II.i and I. 33; see *The Book of Memory* 164-69 and 179-83 esp.

⁸Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask (1953; rpt. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963) 496. Peter Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) notes that in Latin rhetorics all figurative uses of language are classified as ornaments; Dronke is disappointed by this practice, because he appears to assume that "ornament" is essentially opposite to "function" and thus to "meaning" (14). It will become apparent that I do not accept this opposition.

⁹John Onians, *Bearers of Meaning: The Classical Orders in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988) 58.

¹⁰Onians 57. On the use of columns in imperial Rome, see 51-58.

¹¹Onians 60.

¹²Peter Dronke comments (*Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* 129n20) that in *Anticlaudianus* Alan of Lille calls "Fronesis" (human wisdom) also both "Sophia" and "Prudentia" (though she is distinguished from divine Wisdom, "Hagia Sophia"). In his discussion of the virtue of Prudence in "De bono," Albertus Magnus also gives as synonyms both "Fronesis" and "Sophia." Albertus specifically identifies such "prudence" with trained memory in this discussion. Alanus was active at Paris at the end of the twelfth century, Albertus about fifty years later, and might have found this vocabulary still current enough to revive.

¹³See *The Book of Memory* especially 61-71.

¹⁴J. J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1974) 73.

¹⁵Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 15:1, trans. Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981). Bernard's use of etymologies and puns more generally in this passage cannot be fully reproduced in English.

¹⁶I have translated a passage from the second, enlarged edition of 1485, although the same matter is in the earlier edition. This "art of memory" is part of a treatise on rhetoric. Cicero and Quintilian are both commended as masters of the art of memory. Ratdolt printed a third edition, identical (at least in the memory section) to the second, in Augsburg, 1490. Of Publicius not much is known; Mario Cosenza (*A Biographical and Bibliographical Dictionary of the Italian Humanists*, 3 vols. [Boston: G. K. Hall, 1962-67]) says he was a friend of the French humanist, Robert Gaguin, that he may have been from Spain, and that he studied in various Swiss and German universities in the 1460's and 1470's.

¹⁷"Etymologiae cognitio plurimum inquirendis imaginibus et signis confert. Philippus si imaginem suam dure nobis praebeat, etymologiae et nominis sui ductu similitudinem facile accomodabit. A philos enim id est amor et hippos equus ductum habet hoc est amator equorum. Hieronymus sancta lex. Iacobus collectator

interpraetat. Frons a foraminibus"; cited from the Huntington Library copy of Ratdolt's 1485 Venice printing, p. G-8 verso.

¹⁸Discussed briefly in *The Book of Memory* 28, and more fully by Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966) 44-45. The text is in H. Diels and W. Kranz, eds., *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1951-52) 405-16. There is an English translation by Rosamond Kent Sprague, "Dissoi Logoi or Dialexeis," *Mind* 77 (1968): 155-67.

¹⁹*Confessions* X.24, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).