

Inventional Mnemonics, Reading and Prayer: A Reply to Mary Carruthers*

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In *Connotations* 2.2, Mary Carruthers offered a useful commentary concerning the nature of medieval mnemonics as a technique not only for memorization, but also for invention. The focus of Carruthers' essay is the important mnemonic role played by the medieval cultivation of creative etymologies. In the course of arguing her case, however, Carruthers also touches on the complex interrelationship of memory, reading, and prayer in medieval culture. As she argues both here and in her larger study *The Book of Memory*, medieval habits of reading—indeed, the very concept of reading itself—are intimately bound up with mnemonic practices.¹ Central to the medieval practice of reading is the notion that what one reads is incorporated into one's very self, to be worked on by the memory. This fundamental idea is confirmed in medieval devotional literature, one of our best available guides to medieval pedagogy, concepts of reading, and ways of using texts and images. In this essay I wish to comment a little further on the close relationship of reading and memory, and on the role that they jointly play in medieval devotional practices.

That the book is a mirror for the reader is a medieval commonplace, reflected in the many texts whose titles contain the word *mirror* (*speculum*, *mirouer*, *spiegel*, etc.). As is stated in the dedicatory prologue of one typical devotional treatise entitled *Le Mirouer de l'ame*:² "Je vous envoie ce mirouer ouquel vous poéz en mirant les taches de pechié veoir et orner l'ame et le cors de bones vertuz" [I am sending you this mirror in which you can gaze in order to see the blemishes of sin and to

*Reference: Mary Carruthers, "Inventional Mnemonics and the Ornaments of Style: The Case of Etymology," *Connotations* 2.2 (1992): 103-14.

ornament body and soul with good virtues (Paris, Bibl. Nat. fr. 1802, fol. 60r-v)]. As this text reminds us, writing is the ideal means of transmitting material to the memory so that the process of introspection and meditation can continue:

Et par ce que toutes les choses ne peuvent pas estre retenues par oïr, si les met l'en en escripture. Car quant l'en a oublié aucune chose que l'en a oïe, l'en revient tout jors a memoire et a remembrance par escrit de la chose que l'en a oïe et oubliee. (fol. 59v-60r)

[And since not all things can be retained through hearing, they are put into writing. For when one has forgotten something that one has heard, one always recovers the memory through a written copy of the thing that one heard and forgot.]

The book, in other words, is like an external memory bank. Its purpose is to make material available to the memory of the individual, where it can be used for instruction, for self-scrutiny, and for meditation.

Another text in the same anthology, *Li Livres des enfans Israël*, stresses that reading, meditation, and prayer are inextricably linked, essentially different facets of one and the same experience:

Trois manieres sont d'esperituel exercite. C'est leçons, meditations, et oroisons. Ces trois sont si conjointes que l'une ne puet valoir sans l'autre. (Bibl. Nat. fr. 1802, fol. 201v)

[There are three manners of spiritual exercise. These are reading, meditation, and prayer. These three are so interconnected that one cannot be worth anything without the others.]

Clearly, as implied in the *Mirouer de l'ame*, reading is not an end in itself; it is a means to improved prayer and meditation. Again, this is because reading feeds the memory, making possible the creative and ethical work of the mind. Once reading is understood as a process of supplying the memory with images, concepts, and moral and spiritual *exempla*, there is no reason why it must be an activity limited to texts. And indeed the *Livre des enfans Israël* expands gradually on the notion of reading to include not only books, but also the natural world and all of sacred history:

Et sachiez que leçons n'appartient pas tant seulement aus clers, mais autressi aus lais. Car diex a fait .i. livre commun ou tout puent lire. C'est l'espece des creatures. [. . .] Encor sont autre livre commun . . . Et uns autres livres est ouvers qui est livres de vie. C'est la vie des sains et la vie Jhesucrust, qui nos sont moustrees pour exemple prendre. (fol. 202r-v)

[And know that reading belongs not only to clerks, but also to the laity. For God has made a common book where all can read. This is the created world. [. . .] Still other books are common . . . And another book is open which is the book of life. That is the life of the saints and the life of Jesus Christ, which are shown to us as an example to follow.]

Reading—the processing of material by the faculty of memory—is thus a quintessential human activity, and takes place both with and without the supportive prop of an actual book.

Indeed, the topos of memory and meditation as metaphoric acts of reading is widespread in medieval literature, appearing in texts too numerous to list. For Dante, in the famous opening passage of the *Vita Nuova*, the memory of one's own life is a book.³ The texts in a devotional anthology compiled for the Count and Countess of St.-Pol identify three books to be “read” through daily prayer and meditation: the book of the conscience, the book of knowledge, and the book of holy wisdom.⁴ For the anonymous author of a devotional treatise preserved in the Vatican ms. Reg. Lat. 1682,⁵ the Passion—or at least, its manifestation in the individual memory—is a book:

Li livres especialment en quoy nous devons lire senz nule entrelaisse si est la douce remembrance de la mort et de la passion Jhesucrist . . . Li parchemins de cest livre si est la pure char et la sainte qui nasqui et morut sanz pechié. Li fueil de cest livre sont li torment que il doucement et amoreusement souffrit por noz pechiez. Ausi comme nous tornons les fueillez dou livre, tornons et retornons toute la vie a nostre vray ami Jhesucrist. (fol. 26v)

[The book where we should especially read without pause is the sweet remembrance of the death and the Passion of Jesus Christ . . . The parchment of this book is the pure and holy flesh that was born and died without sin. The leaves of this book are the torments that he sweetly and amorously suffered for our sins. Just as we turn the pages of a book, so we turn and return all life long to our true friend Jesus Christ.]

Just as a book is an external memory bank, so the faculty of memory itself is an internal book, containing the record of everything that one

has heard, seen, read, and experienced. If the memory is properly trained, one can in effect reread a book without having to see it again. Once material has been processed and stored in the book of memory, it is available to be used in much the same way that an actual book is: for ethical guidance, self knowledge, spiritual advancement; for entertainment, relaxation, pleasure; for creative inspiration, invention, the generation of new texts and images.

To illustrate just how efficacious this kind of reading and remembering is, I have chosen a group of thirteenth-century texts dealing with the Joys of the Virgin. The Joys, presented in many texts and in varying numbers—typically five, nine, or fifteen—figure in an interesting set of instructions for devotional meditation. This text is transmitted in several manuscripts in rather varied form, and can be addressed to either a male or a female reader.⁶ In its most complete form (Paris, Bibl. Nat. fr. 24429, fol. 58v-63r), this text—rubricated as *Meditacions*—comprises a prologue in which a male narrator addresses a woman in the capacity of spiritual advisor, proposing to share with her his technique for meditative prayer based on the fifteen Joys of the Virgin; a main body enumerating each of the Joys in turn; a prayer to the Virgin inserted between the eleventh and twelfth Joys; an explanation of how to use the Joys as a basis for prayer; and a concluding section on virtue, vice, and penance. The Joys are explicitly presented as a mnemonic device for meditation on the Gospel story:

Acoustumez me sui toz les jors que je i puis entendre a recorder et a retraire .xv. joies que ele ot de dameldieu son pere et son filz, si com l'estoire de l'evangile le nos ensaingne pres de totes. Par ces .xv. joies ai en continual memoire pres de tot le cours de l'evangile. (Bibl. Nat. fr. 24429, fol. 58v)

[I am accustomed, every day that I can attend to it, to recall and to go through fifteen joys that she had from the Lord God her father and her son, almost all of which the Gospel teaches us. By these fifteen joys I have in continual memory nearly the entire course of the Gospel.]

The process of actively remembering the Joys of the Virgin constitutes the basis for prayer: “Voirement de ces joies ne remambre je nulle que je n'aie maniere et forme d'oroison” [Truly I do not remember any one of these Joys without thereby having a technique and form of prayer

(fol. 61v)]. As an example, the narrator demonstrates how one can implore the Virgin for help on the Day of Judgment by invoking each of her Joys in turn:

O très beneuree virge Marie . . . par icele corel joie que te fist li archanges Gabriel quant il te salua de par dieu, et te nonça que tu concevroies du .s. esprit et enfanterois le filz dieu, te pri et te requier que tu me porchaces vers lui pardon de mes pechiez . . . (fol. 62r)

[Oh very fortunate Virgin Mary . . . by that heartfelt joy that the archangel Gabriel gave you when he greeted you in the name of God and announced to you that you would conceive by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the son of God, I pray you and implore you that you secure for me from him forgiveness for my sins . . .]

In ms. Bibl. Nat. fr. 24429, each of the Joys is illustrated, providing an added dimension: the reader can commit to memory not only the verbal enumeration of the Joys but their visual representation as well. In both this manuscript (fol. 60v) and ms. Egerton 745 of the British Library (fol. 33r), an accompanying prayer to the Virgin is illustrated with an image of the manuscript's owner kneeling before the Virgin and Child.⁷ This combination of text and image gives concrete expression to the notion that reading the text of the Joys—whether in the actual book or in the “book” of one’s memory—will facilitate access to the Virgin herself.

The fertile power of the memory, when thus exercised in the service of devotional meditation, is illustrated in ms. Bibl. Nat. fr. 25462, where an abridged version of the treatise on the Fifteen Joys is followed by one on the Virgin’s Five Celestial Joys. The initial rubric clearly identifies the Fifteen Joys as a mnemonic aid to prayer devised by a holy man:

Chi commenche la maniere d’ourer ensi com uns sains abbés ouroit en devotion a nostre dame en ramembranche des .xv. joies que ele eut de son glorieus fils Jhesuchrist. (fol. 135r)

[Here begins the technique of prayer, as a saintly abbot used to pray in devotion to Our Lady in remembrance of the fifteen joys that she had from her glorious son Jesus Christ.]

Following this text, the treatise on the Five Celestial Joys is presented as a direct outgrowth of practicing the techniques outlined therein:

Frere Arnouls de Viler en Braibant, convers de l'ordene de Chistiaus, avoit cascun jour en ramembrance les joies que la beneoite virge Marie ot en terre, et mout si delitoit. Et la dame de misericorde s'aparut a lui en l'enfermerie pour chou qu'ele voloit la devotion de son sergant accroistre de ses plus hautes joies et plus biensureuses et se li dist: "Pour coi biaux amis penses tu toute jour as joies tant seulement esqueles je me sui esjoïe boneureusement en chest monde? Recorde autresi cheles joies des queles jou use orendroit et userai dore en avant es chieus sans fin." (fol. 142v)

[Brother Arnoul of Villers in Brabant, member of the Order of Cîteaux, had every day in his memory the joys that the blessed Virgin Mary had on earth, and he greatly delighted in it. And the Lady of Mercy appeared to him in the infirmary because she wanted to increase the devotion of her servant through her highest and most blessed joys, and thus she said to him: "Why, fair friend, do you think every day only of the joys that I enjoyed happily in this world? Recall as well those joys that I experience now and will experience from here on out in Heaven, without end."]

The text that follows, an enumeration of the Five Celestial Joys, represents Arnoul's obedient fulfilment of the Virgin's request.

This sequence of texts shows, first of all, how an active memory can analyse the Gospel narrative into a series of fifteen key moments, which are then used as the basis for devout meditation; then, how this very process of memory and meditation leads to a direct encounter with the Virgin, as implied in the illustrations of mss. fr. 24429 and Egerton 745; and finally, how the commemorative processing of this encounter leads to a new text. And there is no reason for the cycle to end there. Presented in the manuscript at hand, the two texts are available for incorporation into the reader's memory, where they will provide the raw material for new meditations and, ideally, for new texts. As Carruthers has stressed, memory is an active process, an "inventional faculty." The cognitive processes subsumed under such terms as *avoir en ramembrance* and *recorder* include the reception, processing, storing, retrieval, and recombination of material gleaned from reading in its largest sense: attention to the texts, images, and teachings offered by the world at large.⁸

NOTES

¹*The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990).

²I cite the text from ms. fr. 1802 in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, a fourteenth-century anthology of devotional texts in French and Latin. The manuscript bears the *ex libris* of Charles d'Orleans.

³"In quella parte del libro de la mia memoria dinanzi a la quale poco si potrebbe leggere, si trova una rubrica la quale dice: *Incipit vita nova*" [In that part of the book of my memory where little can be read, is found a rubric that says: *Here begins the new life*]. *Vita Nuova*, ed. Fredi Chiappelli (Milan: Mursia, 1978), p. 19.

⁴The anthology survives complete in three manuscripts, all dating from the fourteenth century: Paris, Bibl. Nat. mss. fr. 1136 and nouv. ac. fr. 4338, and Chantilly, Musée Condé ms. 137. The prose texts alone are found in the fifteenth-century ms. Musée Condé 684. The ms. nouv. ac. fr. 4338 is briefly described, and dated as 1330-40, by François Avril and Jean Lafaurie, *La Librairie de Charles V* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1968) 73-74. The manuscript was originally connected to Charles V by Léopold Delisle, "Notice sur un recueil de traités de dévotion ayant appartenu à Charles V," *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Chartes* 30 (1869): 532-42. Delisle's identification of Gui de Luxembourg and Mahaut de Châtillon as the Count and Countess of St.-Pol mentioned in the anthology can no longer be accepted, since it would require a much later date for the manuscript.

⁵For a detailed description of ms. Vat. Reg. Lat. 1682, see Ernest Langlois, "Notices des manuscrits français et provençaux de Rome antérieurs au XVI^e siècle," *Notices et extraits* 33.1 (1889): 195-208.

⁶Thus far, I have located the text in question in the mss. Paris, Bibl. Nat. fr. 24429, Vatican Reg. Lat. 1682, and British Library Egerton 745, in all of which it retains an address to a female reader ["fille"]; and in Bibl. Nat. fr. 25462, where it is addressed to a male reader ["biaus fils"]. For discussion of this text and its variant versions, see my "A Book Made for a Queen: The Shaping of a Late Medieval Anthology Manuscript (B. N. fr. 24429)," in *The Whole Book: Order and Miscellany in Medieval Manuscripts*, ed. Siegfried Wenzel and Stephen Nichols (forthcoming).

⁷See Paul Meyer, "Notice du ms. Egerton 745 du Musée Britannique," *Romania* 39 (1910): 532-69. On the basis of heraldic emblems Meyer concludes that the manuscript was made for either Jean or Gui de Châtillon, Count of St.-Pol; he reproduces the miniature of the patron before the Virgin, facing p. 537. I have included a reproduction of the illustration from ms. Bibl. Nat. fr. 24429 in "A Book Made for a Queen" (see note 6).

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