

A Reply to Mary Carruthers, "Inventional Mnemonics and the Ornaments of Style"

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I am delighted to have this opportunity to discuss Mary Carruthers's article. Together with the author, I participated in a stimulating workshop on the art of memory organised in October 1991 by New York University and I also had the opportunity to review her work *The Book of Memory*, an important and original contribution to the subject, for *La Rivista dei Libri* (March 1992). It is a pleasure for me to be invited to resume our dialogue in the pages of this journal.

It is, moreover, much appreciated, that *Connotations* has elected to devote considerable space in its first two issues to the role of the art of memory in medieval and Renaissance culture (cf., in addition to the article by M. Carruthers, William E. Engel, "Mnemonic Criticism and Renaissance Literature: A Manifesto," *Connotations* 1.1 [1991]: 12-33). *Ars memoriae*, once relegated to the domains of cultural history and the history of philosophy, should now begin to interest a broader group of scholars, in particular the historians of literature.

We are just beginning to appreciate the true extent and complexity of the concept of *memoria*, which for centuries did not represent a mere adjunct to the classical rhetorical elements of *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio*, but itself profoundly influenced these elements. Thus an entire dimension of the text hitherto ignored by scholars must be recovered, to wit the creative dimension of the memory. In this context I cannot but underline the importance of the thesis linking the two articles; when William Engel speaks of "mnemonic criticism" in Renaissance literature and Mary Carruthers refers to "inventional mnemonics" in medieval

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

literature, both are focusing on the key role that the techniques of memory played in the formulation of a literary text, in many cases determining its very structure and formal characteristics.

When this dimension is taken into account, whole new vistas open up for exploration. Indeed, as I discovered during the course of my own research on 14th and 15th century Italian religious texts (sermons and mystical writings), and in my studies of Renaissance literature in general, treatises on the art of memory represented only the most obvious expression of a whole series of literary, artistic and devotional practices in which memory played a central role. Studying the art of memory from this perspective, it is possible for the historian to retrace an elaborate network of relationships that was created over the centuries between different types of images, from the verbal images of poets and writers to the visual images created by the artist, and the mental images deposited in the faculty of the soul.

I share Engel's surprise that so few historians of literature have as yet explored any of the literary implications of the art of memory, although it must be said that some work in this area has already been done. I limit myself to just two bibliographical references: the catalogue prepared by myself and Massimiliano Rossi for the exhibition *La fabbrica del pensiero: dall'arte della memoria alle neuroscienze* held in Florence from 23 March to 26 June 1989 (Milan: Electa 1989; and in *The Enchanted Loom*, ed. P. Corsi [Oxford: OUP 1991] 62-65); and "Ars memorativa: Eine Forschungsbibliographie zu den Quellenschriften der Gedächtniskunst von den antiken Anfängen," edited by Sabine Heiman and Barbara Keller (*Frühneuzeit-Info* 3.1 [1992]: 65-87). Certainly, finding information and keeping up with the latest developments in this area is not facilitated by the complex nature of the subject matter, which embraces a variety of literary genres, disciplines, and languages. The creation of an information network accessible to all scholars interested in the subject of memory would be of inestimable value.

Returning to Mary Carruthers, there are a few methodological considerations whose importance I should like to underline. As the author states, a special effort is required—nothing less than a leap of the imagination—to understand a mentality completely different from our own, one with its own precisely defined code and set of rules. If

we do not make this effort, we risk not so much misunderstanding the problem as missing it altogether, letting it slip beyond our critical horizon.

The second point to be made is linked to the first, and concerns displacing our analysis from the abstract theory of *ars memoriae* to the literary and visual forms influenced by mnemonic techniques. A distinction can be made, for example, between the widespread, essentially traditional, use which was made of mnemonic techniques during the Renaissance—relying on ideas and images that had entered common usage thanks in part to the diffusion of printed books—and the re-elaboration and renewal of this tradition that was being carried out at the same time, on the basis of specific philosophical ideas, by intellectuals such as Giulio Camillo and Giordano Bruno. It is useful to distinguish between these two levels and to take both into consideration in any analysis of the art of memory. A modern parallel is provided by the science of psychoanalysis. At least some of its terminology and concepts have entered into common parlance, but this certainly does not signify that a person whom you overhear referring blithely to "archetypes" or the Oedipus complex is an expert on Jung or Freud.

The last point which I would like to make concerns the question through which specific rhetorical processes and formal elements the mnemonic techniques contributed to create the text, and render it memorable. Mary Carruthers focuses in her article on the device of etymology and demonstrates most convincingly how the different etymologies which were applied to a formal name could transform that name into a *locus* ("common place") of invention within a text, a *locus* for memory, and a component serving the internal processes of meditation and imitation.

Since one of the problems of the cultural historian is to follow the interplay of continuity and change over time, it is interesting to examine to what extent the techniques analysed by Carruthers outlasted the medieval period and continued to be used during the Renaissance. In fact, although in the interplay between memory and imitation the mystical, religious dimension was replaced by a classicising one, the canons themselves remained unchanged, based as always on the imitation of exemplary texts. Thus, a 16th century writer seeking to imitate

Petrarch or Cicero had to follow the same procedure utilised by his medieval predecessors, that of impressing his model in his memory, internalising it in such a way that its component elements could be drawn forth again and manipulated and transformed with ease. To mention a case in point, it is often forgotten that Giulio Camillo's theatre was intended in part to function as a classical theatre of the memory on a grand scale, designed to help one to remember the words and rhetorical devices necessary to reconstruct almost any text.

I would like to conclude with an example of "inventional mnemonics" very similar to those presented by Mary Carruthers. In *Artificiosae memoriae libellus* by Johann Spangenberg (Wittenberg: Seitz, 1570) we can find indications regarding how to translate into images even those terms most resistant to visualisation, such as adverbs and prepositions. For the adverb "cras" ("tomorrow") he asks the reader to evoke in his memory the picture of a "corvum crocitantem [a croaking crow]" (c. B4v). This image, based on the onomatopoeic re-creation of the cry of the crow (cra, cra, *cras*) can be traced back at least 150 years. One of the most famous preachers of the 15th century, the Franciscan monk Saint Bernardino of Siena, utilised this image to refer to those persons who continually put off until tomorrow the moment of penitence and moral redemption. In a sermon delivered in 1425, Saint Bernardino exhorted his listeners to change their lives, to repent and to confess their sins: "Cavatevi el corbo di gola che dice Cra, cra! domane domane! [Rid yourselves of the crow in your throats that always cries Cra, cra! tomorrow, tomorrow!]" (Saint Bernardino of Siena, *Le prediche volgari: Quaresimale del 1425*, ed. C. Cannarozzi, vol. 1 [Pistoia: Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, 1940] 78).

Thus we find the pseudo-etymology which linked *cras* to the call of the crow giving rise to a felicitous metaphorical invention (we can imagine Saint Bernardino accompanying his admonition with some effective vocal mimicry), as well as to a mnemonic image. At the same time it provided a vivid visual image, one which we in fact later find depicted in an illustration from *Stultifera navis* by Sebastian Brant (Paris: Marnet, 1498; plate 1, p. 42; reproduced in *Sapienza figurata: 234 engravings from 1457 to 1718*, S. Brant, P. Maccio, G. M. Mitelli [Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1967] plate 32). The plate shows the

traditional figure of the fool, with three crows—one perched on his fool's cap and one in each hand. Next to each bird appears the word *cras*, a reminder of how foolish it is to put off repentance to a tomorrow which may never arrive.

However, the story of our image does not end here. In a well-known book of games published in Siena in 1572 by Girolamo Bargagli we find in a game of comparisons the following example: the maiden who always seems to be on the point of ceding to her suitor, but who continually puts off her decision until tomorrow is compared to the crow with its eternal cry "cra, cra" (*cras, cras*) (Girolamo Bargagli, *Dialogo de' giuochi che nelle vegghie sanesi si usano di fare*, ed. P. D'Incalci Ermini [Siena: Accademia degli Intronati, 1982] 155). An unflattering comparison, certainly, but it illustrates the ease with which certain associations could move between word and image, memory and invention, sermon and wordplay, remaining the same and yet modulating across the centuries.

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(Translated by Lisa Chien)