

Mnemonic Criticism & Renaissance Literature: A Manifesto

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I. Surveying the Terrain

Over the last thirty years the instrumental role of memory in humanist theories of knowledge and pedagogy has received intermittent scholarly attention.¹ The results of that research have been as fruitful as they have been provocative, and so it is surprising to me that so few literary historians have chosen to pursue the implications of what was surely commonplace to jurists, notaries, scholars, doctors, divines, teachers, and merchants from the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. From Cicero to Descartes the memory arts were vital to the study and application of rhetoric and composition. It enabled the practitioner to devise and elaborate topics of invention. One had only to imagine a recognizable structure—such as an animal, man, room, theatre, house, or city—and superimpose onto it a striking image designed to trigger its easy recollection. We have ample evidence to conclude that the *ars memorativa*, the artificial memory scheme, provided a quick and easy way to organize, recall and use information.

In the first part of this essay I will suggest that it is in the interest of Renaissance scholarship to recover some of the assumptions underlying an on-going tradition involving mnemonic thought and practice. Among the benefits of such a line of inquiry is that it provides fresh insight into the period by focussing on the writings of those who were familiar with and who, whether intentionally or unwittingly, incorporated the arts of memory into their work. Before moving to more particular applications of mnemonic criticism, let me clarify what was meant by the art of memory in the Renaissance. The most popular of the English proponents was John Willis.² In his

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Mnemonica, sive Reminiscendi ars, Willis explained how a system for enhancing "local memory" worked.³

[E]xperience teacheth, that *Places* and *Idea's* do much conduce to faithful remembrance of things; particularly as to *Places*, their usefulness doth hence appear, that if a Traveller observe any remarkable thing in a cross-way, or some noted place of his journey, returning the same way, he doth not onely remember the place, but calleth to mind what soever he had seen there, though at present removed. The same thing often happeneth in *Repetition* of *Idea's*; for the mind as it were walking through the same *Places*, in which formerly it had disposed *Idea's*, and carefully marshalled them in order, with purpose of perusal, by occasion of the *Places*, is much assisted in recalling *Idea's* to mind there placed: So Printers by Distribution of their Letters into several Boxes, do without any hesitation fetch them thence upon occasion, extending hands to the right Box.

It was so natural to practice an artificial system of memory that printers, among others who may well have been ignorant of classical rhetoric in which *memoria* figured prominently, came by its fundamental principles on their own. Similarly, Renaissance writers who may not have studied elaborate systems of memory training nonetheless might find its principles and patterns creeping into their own practices.

John M. Steadman noted that the issues raised by Frances Yates in her landmark study *The Art of Memory* are important not only for analyzing the artistic method of writers like Dante, "but also for the topical arrangement of figures—exempla and personifications—in other medieval and Renaissance poems."⁴ He goes on to observe that symbolic gardens and buildings "frequently serve as topical frameworks, like the general 'headings' in commonplace books." Close readings of various poems from medieval and Renaissance literature bear out that this way of organizing material according to designated headings both permeated and gave shape to numerous works.⁵ Once readers have acquired knowledge of the internal logic by which such a work of literature is governed, then they are more likely to discern additional and resplendent shades of its meaning.

What has been claimed for medieval poems holds as well for many Renaissance works, ranging from the numerological shell of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* to the chiasmic structure of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.⁶ But before a movement in literary studies devoted to examining the applications of such aesthetic principles that are based on Renaissance

notions of mnemonics can find a more receptive audience, we must first consider the nuts and bolts with which these literary programmes were constructed.

In the sixteenth century memory in general and *anamnesis* in particular had special and instrumental roles in the emblematically oriented aesthetic so characteristic of the period, especially in the light of the Platonic maxim "knowledge is based on remembrance."⁷ For example Ben Jonson, who remembered well the method of composition taught to him in his early school-days, often set down in prose the images he hoped to translate into poetry. The same sort of process applied to Francis Bacon, who began his *Essayes* from a collection of his compiled *sententiae* or classical citations.⁸ Because the prose in the early modern era, following Montaigne's lead, shows signs of the author's effort to reproduce something of his initial conception both in the content and the form of his discourse, Montaigne's *Essais* are an ideal point of departure for such a study. After examining some of the essential elements of invention, memory and composition in Montaigne, we can expand the scope of inquiry (always with caution) to include other monuments of Renaissance and Baroque prose. A representative example of such a study can be found in the diptychal design of Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial* and *Garden of Cyrus*.⁹

At some point in the development of this area of inquiry, more attention will need to be directed toward the way *sententiae* (classical and aphoristic citations) served the essayist as a special kind of memory, as a place-holder which supplied him with points of reference and places to return to later for further literary flourishes and inventions. The arrangement of select *sententiae* in the essay parallels the placement of the image in the art of memory. Therefore the apparently ambling and self-reflexive prose of Montaigne, and by extension that of Robert Burton and Thomas Browne, supplies us with significant points of orientation. Moving out from the literary architecture and idiosyncratic embellishments associated with particular structures, some subsequent areas of investigation might well include the mnemonic architecture and mythological figures as they pertain to the ornaments typically found in rooms of an imaginary "Memory Palace" and also those in actual palaces and country estates.¹⁰ Closely associated with this, we will need to explore how memory palaces

made possible the design of memory theatres, and how actual theatres in turn borrowed from the available stock of memory images.

Mnemonic criticism as I have been outlining it has still other closely related applications. By investigating the popular emblems of death and accompanying doggerel, designed to remind the viewer of his or her ultimate end, we can rescue from obscurity some of the commonplace images and moral saws known to Catholics and Protestants alike. After all, with its explicit commemorative injunction to reflect on the motto "Memento Mori" [Remember your Death], the death's head is a focal emblem of the Renaissance. Treating the *Book of Christian Prayers*, better known as Queen Elizabeth's Prayer Book, in terms of mnemonic criticism enables us to elucidate the relation of the visual and textual properties of this popular work in ways never before attempted. Such an approach permits us to address the rationale behind the series of moral messages along the margins of this book which are conveyed by hieroglyphic memorials of man's transience and of God's grand design. Looking at the home prayer book in this way, at its messages and its method for conveying them, will make accessible to contemporary readers the ways the *ars memorativa* was expressed through and, in some cases, gave shape to contemplative texts. This in turn will enhance our understanding of rhetorical and homiletic displays of prominent churchmen like John Donne and Lancelot Andrewes—in the light of the arts of memory, which is to say, in the same way they viewed them.¹¹ Perhaps the most instructive, because most explicit case of the *ars memorativa* functioning both as a topic of discussion and structuring principle for homiletic discourse is Daniel Featley's *Clavis Mystica* (1636).¹² Featley served as chaplain to Charles I. Although his sermons are by no means the apogee of the genre, his work exemplifies the commonplace attitude toward the interplay of mnemonic emblems and admonitory sermons in the seventeenth century. The text of his thirty-fifth sermon, based on Exodus 28, dwells on the arrangement of the twelve precious stones ceremonially worn by Hebraic high priests. Each stone is a rich "place of invention," and provides Featley with a seemingly endless chain of intertextual readings of the Old and New Testaments.¹³ He acknowledges as much when he says: "and because the rowes and stones in them may serve for *places* and *Images* in artificiall memory,

to imprint more firmly in our mind some remarkable story of the Patriarchs, whose names were engraven in them, I will observe some congruities between them" (501). And he does so for five folio pages. He then notes the following, which provides insight into the aesthetic and epistemological assumptions common to emblems and the arts of memory:

Artificiall memory . . . consisteth of images and places. We need not goe farre for them, we have them both in my Text, *places*, Ver[se]. 17. *Thou shalt set it full of places for stones; & images* most resplendent in the Verses following: and very happy were I, if as here I have the names, so I had naturall effects attributed to some of these jewels: . . . I may build not *hay and stubble*, but *gold, silver, and precious stones*, such as shine in my Text; which I divide according to the foure rowes into four parts. (506)

Taking each stone and its place, he reconstructs his discourse on the arrangement of the precious stones with respect to their correspondences to aspects of God's divine scheme. For example, the ruby, he asserts, "hath a perfect colour of flesh, whence it is called in Latin *Carneolus*; but with a lustre and resplendency farre above the nature of flesh. What fitter embleme of the rayes of divine majesty shining in the flesh of our Saviour?"

But this reference to a lapidary emblem shading into one of Christianity's chief paradoxes (the Incarnation), in conjunction with the mental image evoked by the twelve stones arranged in four rows, strains his rhetorical device to its metaphorical breaking point. And yet, because of Featley's recognition of the commemorative value both of the subject of his discourse and his way of conveying it, he translates his image into words and ultimately into his audience's mind's eye.

Such a discursive use of emblems parallels Giordano Bruno's earlier descriptions and decidedly Neo-Platonic interpretations of emblems in his *Heroic Frenzies* (1585).¹⁴ Despite their differences in mystical and poetic orientation, both Bruno and Featley seem to have been aware that their representations of the divine majesty, concealed within worldly things, are indebted to the mnemonic quality of emblematic devices. Featley goes so far as to acknowledge that his oratorical technique as well as his sermon's shape and structure are all grounded in the arts of memory; and, moreover, that his procedure derives from

that practiced by the divinely inspired authors of Holy Scripture and of the psalms.

THat the second Speaker, that sweet singer of Israel, whose ditty was, *Awake, & sing ye that sleep in the dust*, made (according to my Text) a *row*, or *Canticum graduum*, a *Psalm of ascents* or *degrees*, I cannot but even in a duty of thankfulness acknowledge, for the help of memory I received from it: had not he made a *row*, that is, digested & disposed his matter in excellent order, I should never have bin able to present to you the jewels set in this row, which are all (as you see) most orient. (512)

Featley's pun on "row" (a way to organize a song, and the disposition of the stones in Aaron's breastplate) is nuanced further by an understanding of the chief assumption of an artificial memory system: namely, that the orderly arrangement of symbols standing for what one wanted to recall provided a quick and easy way to organize, preserve for future use, and, if need be, to transform and transmit information. The principles of organization which lead to spiritual benefits as they were described and used by clerical orators like Featley become evident in the light of mnemonic criticism. And what is more, a sustained analysis along this line of inquiry provides a key to unlock the mnemonic mysteries of the emblem book tradition.

Emblem books and related literature (including dances of death, fête-books, collections of moral emblems, *imprese* and heraldic designs) were popular from the mid-1530s until the middle of the seventeenth century.¹⁵ They catered to and reinforced the emblematic *mentalité* of the day. Books of moral emblems were composed by men with such disparate views as Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza, and the recusant English Catholic priest Henry Hawkins, and the anonymous author of *Ashrea*. This latter text follows a strict mnemonic pattern for contemplation that is similar in kind although different in degree from St. Ignatius's "Spiritual Exercises." *Ashrea: or the Grove of Beatitude, Represented in Emblemes: And by the Art of Memory . . .* defines the way a "local memory system" is said to apply to the eight beatitudes covered in the book.¹⁶

LOCAL MEMORY depends on several places dispos'd at a certain distance one from the other, purposely consign'd to quicken the *Memorative power*. And this is wrought, by presenting one thing to it by the representation of some other, accompany'd with a reason, why that other was there placed.

By this means, Remembrance, or Reminiscence (which is an attendant to Reason) presents us with that which we had otherwise forgotten To render what hath been said the more easily comprehensible example; My place (which, like the first matter, stands in an indifferency as to all forms, or as soft Wax, susceptible of all impressions) shall be, *Jonas* swallowed up by the Whale, which I seem really to behold.

The other English emblem book that explicitly used a mnemonical design was Henry Hawkins's *Parthenia Sacra* (1633). The entire work is conceived as a "Garden of Memory" because the visual, poetic, and symbolic illustrations of the topical themes involve the natural and artificial things located in or near a garden: roses, violets, bees, irises, nightingales, as well as a house, hen, dove, fountain, and mount. The first plate titled "THE PLAT-FORME OF THE GARDEN" depicts a garden, and it sets the scene, or rather provides the background upon which Hawkins places objects commonly found in any garden.¹⁷ On the opening page the reader is told to enter

into the large, spacious, and ample GARDEN of our SACRED PARTHENES, and there behold those specious, and most delicious Obiects; al, so wholly consecrated to her seruice, that they seeme as borne to expresse her prayses. . . . Goe, I say; suruey her GARDEN, beset with the bashful ROSE, the candid LILLIE (sig. A7)

Hawkins's plan for the reader to enter a "Garden of the Sacred Parthenes" depends on and legislates a way of looking at and of gaining instruction from images and symbols within an elaborate allegorical design that recalls the classical *Table of Cebes*.¹⁸

To prevent the reader from misapprehending the memorable matter arranged within his garden, he included a detailed and elaborate discourse about the contents of the Garden of Memory. Hawkins's method of composition—consisting of devices, mottoes, pictures and poems—induced the reader to become aware of divine mysteries revealed through ordinary and commonplace images, all of which were situated within an encompassing mnemotechnic design.

But soft, my *Genius*; ere thou leade thy Reader into the Maze or Labyrinth of the beauties therin contained, pause heer a while, to consider how to behaue thy self First then shalt thou presente him with the Symbol it self, set-forth in manner of a *Deuise*, with an *Imprese* and *Motto*, expressing the allusion to the SACRED PARTHENES herself, in some mysterie of hers,

or attribute belonging to her Then looking back with a fresh reuiew on the Symbol itself, by way of an *Essay*, shalt thou make a fuller *Suruey* therof, discoursing on the *Paragon* herself, to match, compare, and paralel them togeather, to find out some *Elogies* or other, in prayse of our SACRED PARTHENES And after al, shalt thou inuite him to Apostrophize with the Paragon PARTHENES herself, vnder the Symbol so handled, being the vtmost scope, and ful fruition of the whole; and so conclude the peece with some boone or suite, correspondent to the present occasion, in euerie one. And this method would I haue thee keepe in al. (sig. A7v-A8v)

If nothing else, this overly-wrought method of meditation and edification (at once emblematic and mnemonic) provides a litmus-test for mnemonic criticism, and it attests to the diversity and the curious popularity of Memory Palaces in the Renaissance.¹⁹

II. Apology for the Memory Arts

I stand in a long line of those who have attempted to vindicate the arts of memory. Simonides of Ceos was perhaps the first to advocate a "place system" for remembering; his involved arranging items—people—neatly around a table.²⁰ This is the same Simonides who, according to Plutarch, first equated poetry's methods with those of painting.²¹ Therefore, the legendary beginning of the arts of memory developed out of the artistic practices of a man who saw poetry, painting and mnemonics in terms of intense visualization.²² The same sort of intense visualization—whether involving the orderly arrangement of topics in rooms and connected buildings, on stages appointed with properties, or within a well-planned garden—contributed in large measure to the fantastic, and at times overly-ingenious literary architecture of the Renaissance. My aim in rehabilitating the forgotten mnemonic programs is not to argue for or against the merits of any visualization schemes, but rather to indicate the extent to which the artificial memory persisted well into the seventeenth century and informed the literary works of the day.

Renaissance apologies for memory, which anticipate the usual objections to complicated "local memory systems," frequently appear at the beginning of mnemotechnical treatises. For example, John Willis attempts to reverse "what the prejudice of many has long proscribed"

by arguing that the use of images in a mnemonic system based on places is nothing more than a kind of internal picture writing.²³ Not all of the mnemonic treatises are as straight-forward as Willis's and, I must confess, some are so complicated and idiosyncratic that they are virtually useless—then as now. And yet we cannot afford to dismiss an intellectual and textual tradition as being inconsequential to the literary life of the age in which it evolved simply because some of the works are abstruse. The fact remains that books on the cultivation of topical memory systems (like Peter of Ravennas's *Phenix*, Raymond Lull's *Brevis Ars*, and Guglielmo Gratoroli's *De Memoria*), and those touching on memory in general (ranging from Gerard's *Herbal* to Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*) all had a wide readership. Sometime during the seventeenth century, however, the arts of memory ceased to be considered a serious area of study, and the application of mnemonic aids to organize knowledge in convenient ways became little more than tricks for schoolchildren to con their declensions.

It is noteworthy therefore that at the opening of the eighteenth century, Giovanni Brancacci attempted a vindication of the entire tradition.²⁴ He stood as if atop a mountain and surveyed the entire history of contributions to the art of memory. Today, his obscure text stands as a reminder of the genre which had once been enormously popular and which had interested the leading men of letters during the Renaissance. Many of the works mentioned in Brancacci's long list of treatises have not survived into our own time. This explains in part why we have lost sight of the writings on the instrumental role of memory and the schemes designed to enhance recollection and also to preserve the acts and deeds of prominent men and women. But this is not the sole cause. Many fine scholars who have come into contact with this branch of Renaissance rhetorical training have either ignored or scoffingly dismissed mnemonic schemes in general and along with them the often complicated emblematic networks they generated. This is a grave loss to scholarship, among other reasons because the chief schemes catering to an English speaking audience were all composed and, presumably, used during the time of Shakespeare.

The history of scoffing at the art of memory is as long (though perhaps more venerable) as that of vindicating it. The Lullian system

of wheels within wheels that Rabelais makes sport of in Gargantua's letter to Pantagruel, like the popular method of recalling items by imagining them situated in ordered stalls which Webster jests about in his Induction to Marston's *The Malcontent*, each attests to the abuses of systems obviously familiar enough to their original audiences to have elicited a chuckle. But what of the other, the more serious and less extravagant mnemonic systems, and what of Renaissance views of memory in general? Can we consign the entire tradition to oblivion and dismiss outright Lull's, Bruno's, Camillo's and Kircher's efforts to arrange in a mental filing system all knowledge of the natural world as they understood it?

Unfortunately many today who have already written off the literary merits and scholarly value of the role of the memory arts in Renaissance studies are perhaps unfamiliar with the classical accounts concerning the efficacy and faculty of memory, the Patristic and medieval commentaries on them, as well as what contemporary historians have discovered about their revival during the Enlightenment.²⁵ Few will doubt that, among the methods of organizing material and of subsequently organizing literary texts, Renaissance writers relied to a large extent on rudimentary forms of the memory arts and attendant practices—particularly by keeping commonplace books and reciting in rhymed couplets important information so as to assure easy recollection. What I am suggesting is hardly novel; in fact, it was so much a part of the thinking and literary activity of the Renaissance that we have all but stopped remarking on its properties and provenance. It is high time we remembered memory. Mnemonic criticism can help us in this endeavor because it taps into already existing modes of analysis and brings to prominence the formal assumptions and literary design of works in the early-modern era. "Lastly," to close this apology for the memory arts with the words of my intellectual forbear John Willis, "if any man ask what cause moved me to divulge this Art, my answer is, that having diligently read over all the books . . . and bestowed much labour . . . I did heartily desire to raise this excellent Art out of the thick fogge wherein it was invelped."

III. Imagining the Body & Its Place in the Art of Memory

Let me begin the final section of this manifesto of mnemonic criticism with the maxim attributed to Protagoras (as transmitted by Sextus Empiricus): "Man is the measure of all things, of things that are, that they are, and things that are not, that they are not."²⁶ During the early Renaissance the first part of this sentence came to be associated with Vitruvian principles of order and arrangement.²⁷ Man was taken to represent the universal *metron* by which all things were to be assessed and against which they were compared.

Not only did this have ramifications for the way man conceived his place in the world, but the reverse as well: the very act of imagining his place in the world involved the internalization of his own figure—quite literally—as a way to keep in mind the objects of his scrutiny. For example, as I will discuss in what follows, according to the conventional operations of an artificial memory scheme, especially the "local" memory palace, the human figure was used as a place-holder from which the practitioner could get his or her bearings. One was to imagine himself placed in a city, palace, room, or theatre and to look around; this was the basic principle for visualizing and recollecting various symbols and private hieroglyphics which previously had been deposited each in its "place."

Let me clarify this procedure by using an example from contemporary computer jargon. The role of the human figure in such a system is like a cursor in a document one is in the process of creating, and to which he may well return later for further additions and alterations. The human figure in a local memory system is like a cursor in that it stands out from the rest of the configured letters, symbols, and images, which thus permits movement from one part of the newly created text to another. As the cursor, he indicates—by a trace—from where he has come; further, he provides (and is himself) a convenient place to review or advance toward any other part of the document.

With this in mind, man's place in the Renaissance Memory Theatre can be said to exist at the threshold between what is and what is not, between what is demonstrably real and what is hypothetically and symbolically present; as such, it provides an ideal way to chart the intellectual movement within an imaginary construct so much a part

of the life and letters of the Renaissance. With the hope of opening up to scrutiny the implications of these and related issues, this part of the essay seeks to recover and bring together the textual trace of this commonplace procedure of mental gymnastics which used the human form as a key element in mnemotechtonic schemes.

The fundamental principles of architecture according to Vitruvius are Order (*taxis*), Arrangement (*diathesis*), and "Proportion and Symmetry and Decor and Distribution which in Greek is called *oeconomia*."²⁸ These features of Vitruvian architecture provide convenient categories for discussing the fundamental aspects of the internal architecture by which men and women in the Renaissance sought to represent and respond to knowledge—especially where memory was concerned. In the following exposition of these components, Order ("the balanced adjustment of the details of the work") will be seen to correspond to the topic of Memory; Arrangement ("the fit assemblage of details") to Emblems. And, although it is integral to my larger project, I mention *oeconomia* only in passing.²⁹

Order is the primary term, not only in the building of material artifacts, but also in the building of imaginary ones. Classical rhetoricians advocated strolling through an imaginary building as a way of composing, recalling, and delivering a speech.

The first thought is placed, as it were in the forecourt; the second, let us say, in the living-room; the remainder are placed in due order all round the impluvium . . . all these places are visited in turn and the various deposits are demanded from their custodians, as the sight of each recalls the respective details.³⁰ (*Inst. Or.* XI.ii.20)

Consistent with this aspect of the classical rhetorical tradition which Quintilian anthologized in his study of oratory, Hugh Plat explained to his Elizabethan readers:

YOU must make choice of some large edifice or building, whose Chambers or Galleries bee of some reasonable receipt, and so familiar vnto you, as that euerie part of each of them may present it selfe readily vnto the eyes of your minde when you call for them. In euerie of these roomes you must place ten seuerall subiectes at a reasonable distaunce one from the other, least the neerenesse of their placing shoulde happen to confound your Memorie.³¹

Basically, an artificial memory system involves choosing a site with distinct places which may be impressed easily upon the mind. What can be done with the most common sort of memory plan, "a spacious house divided into a number of rooms," Quintilian relates, "can equally well be done in connexion with public buildings, a long journey, the ramparts of a city, or even pictures" (*Inst. Or.* XI.ii.18-21). Classical uses of the memory arts were aimed at juridical and political oratory, the Latin Middle Ages revived these arts for the study of rhetoric and grammar, the Dominicans used them to order and recall the Bible and commentaries, and the Jesuits to organize and teach the truths of the religion and natural science. All of these uses were recognized in the Renaissance English version of Peter of Ravennas's celebrated memory treatise, *The Phenix*; the title page advertises that the art of memory is "profytable to all professours of scyences, Grammaryens, Rethoryciens, Dialectyke, Legystes, Phylosophres & Theologiens."³² Even though the oratorical and scholastic uses of memory systems may not have been as prevalent in Plat's day as they were in Quintilian's or Thomas Aquinas's, in an age when paper was still quite expensive to produce, the average Elizabethan had many uses for such mnemotechnical devices. Secular and commercial uses of the artificial memory supplanted the previous sacred and solemn ones. In his critical assessment of John Dickson's plan for an artificial memory, Plat demonstrated admirable common-sense:

I must of necessitie confesse, that although it doe neither answere his great promises, nor the expectation of those his Schollers, whose good opinions he did entertaine so long with such golden hopes in the bettering of their weake memories, that yet notwithstanding the same is verie sufficient to procure an assured and speedie remembrance of any 10. 20. 30. or 40. principall things more or lesse, . . . as also for the remembrance of all such pleasant tales and histories as shall passe in table talke, from conceived wits. (*Jewell House* sig. N2v-N3, pp. 84-85)

Whether used to recall "pleasant tales and histories," or to recollect, in sequence, the verses in the gospel of St. Matthew, the names of the Caesars, or a list of things to do once you arrived at the marketplace, the art of memory consisted of backgrounds and images. The most widely used and enduring of the memory treatises, the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, succinctly defines these components and

reiterates the importance of sequentiality in the disposition of diverse images.³³

By backgrounds I mean such scenes as are naturally or artificially set off on a small scale, complete and conspicuous, so that we can grasp and embrace them easily by the natural memory—for example, a house, an intercolumnar space, a recess, an arch, or the like. An image is, as it were, a figure, mark, or portrait of the object we wish to remember We should therefore, if we desire to memorize a large number of items, equip ourselves with a large number of backgrounds, so that in these we may set a large number of images. I likewise think it obligatory to have these backgrounds in a series, so that we may never by confusion in their order be prevented from following the images—proceeding from any background we wish, whatsoever its place in the series, and whether we go forwards or backwards—nor from delivering orally what has been committed to the backgrounds. (*Ad Her.* III.xvi-xvii)

The linking of the places to be visited is an essential aspect of this type of artificial memory system; according to Quintilian “we require, therefore, places, real or imaginary, and images or symbols, which we must, of course, invent for ourselves” (*Inst. Or.* XI.ii.20-21). He qualifies what he means by “images” by quoting Cicero: “we use places like wax tablets and symbols in lieu of letters We must for this purpose employ a number of remarkable places, clearly envisaged and separated by short intervals” (*Inst. Or.* XI.ii.21-22).³⁴ To use such a memory system then, one must invent backgrounds (or “places”) and arrange within them a series of striking images. Ravennas explained that the places were like “cardes or scrolls or other thynges for to wrytte in. The ymages be ye symylytudes of the thynges that we wyll retayne in mynde.”³⁵ These similitudes were part and parcel of a visual short-hand which, in the Renaissance, were expressed as emblems and other symbolic images whose meanings were assigned to them sometimes quite arbitrarily and idiosyncratically. For example, John Plat, after suggesting a list of images suitable for placement within a mnemotechnical background, including a dunghill, tub, night-gown, and ape, concludes that any such image is apt for devising subjects “wherein you may place all such thinges as you woulde remember, and as Maister Dickson tearmed it, to animate the *umbras* or *ideas rerum memorandarum*. But heerein euerie man may best please his owne witte and memorie” (*Jewell House* sig. N1v, p. 82).

The mnemonic images that were arranged in imaginary rooms might well have been taken from anthologies of visual commonplaces, like the emblem books of Alciati and Aneau, or Valeriano's celebrated *Hieroglyphicorum Collectanea*. To facilitate easier and more rapid access to the information contained in such volumes, indexes were added to later editions of Alciati and Valeriano and the images were classified by topical headings (virtues, vices, liberal arts, humors and so on). Such texts and indexes were as valuable to the jurist and merchant as they were to the poet and playwright. For example, in his account of the various images and words that could be used within a typical memory theatre, John Willis suggested that his readers use all available varieties of emblems.³⁶

The first kind of compound Idea's, is of them which consist partly of a Direct Idea, partly of a Scriptile. Of this sort are, an history painted in a faire table, with verses vnderneath explaining it; a libell or Epigramme, made vpon some thing done, supposed to be written in a paper, and pasted vpon the opposite wall, and the thing done expressed in action vpon the stage; An armed Knight bearing his Scutcheon and imprese written therein; and the like.

The second kind . . . is of them which consist partly of a Relative Idea, and partly of a Scriptile. Of this sort are innumerable examples in Emblemes, written by *Beza*, *Alciat*, *Peacham*, and others. For in all Emblemes, the picture occupying the vpper part of the table, is a Relatiue Idea; and that which is written vnderneath, a Scriptile.³⁷

I would call attention here to the emblematic quality of memory images and the mnemonic quality of emblems which men and women of the Renaissance would have taken for granted. By the same token, we can see how this principle of arrangement in the internal architecture of mnemotechnics is analogous to that in the external architecture described by Vitruvius.

The stage was ideally suited to serve as a popular artificial memory system, because, after all, it was the place where people were used to hearing memorable words repeated over and over and to seeing memorable deeds played out again and again. Building on previous spatially oriented mnemonic schemes, Willis explains the commonplace understanding of how to use such a complex device:

The Art of *Memory*, which we now treat of consisteth of *Ideas*, and places, wherein we will first handle the *Reposition of Idea's* *Reposition of Idea's*

is, when things to be remembered, are charged upon *Memory* by *Idea's*, disposed in certain places of a *Repository* A *Repository* is an imaginary fabrick, fancied Artificially, built of hewen stone, in form of a *Theater*, the form whereof followeth; suppose the Edifice to be twelve yards in length within the walls, in breadth six yards, and in height seven yards, the roof thereof flat . . . lying wholly open to view, without any wall on that side supposed next us: Let there be imagined a *Stage* of smooth gray Marble, even and variegated with a party coloured border . . . and raised a yard high above the *Level* of the ground . . . Let all the walls, that is, the opposite wall, & two ends be wainscotted with *Cypresse* boards, so artificially plained and glewed, that the joynts be indiscernable³⁸

It was within such a theatre that various memorable images were placed so that, at a glance, one could reconstruct an entire speech, play, or agenda. Willis's curious, almost ludicrous attention to the details of this setting for mnemonic aids indicates that part of the efficacy of such an artificial memory theatre resided in the fabricator's ability to make the artifice appear as "natural" as possible. The theatre within his mind must coincide at every point with one that could come into his view in daily life. And yet, as the seamless joining of the floor planks suggests, and as is the case with any of the mimetic arts whose value is gaged by its relative likeness to the original, attention must not be allowed to settle on its obviously constructed nature.

Within the vocabulary of valid memory images used to find a place in such an imaginary construction, as in the structuralist conception of language, there are only differences. Although relations based on similarity are certainly allowed, if the memory image is too similar to what it is said to represent, or too close (whether in proximity or in meaning) to another memory image, then it ceases to be singular and distinguishable on its own, and becomes unrecognizable and therefore useless to this system. Consequently, memory treatises are preoccupied with the issues of recognizability and difference. This appears to have been a response to the threat that images might blend in too well with those around them, and cease to be distinguishable. Without sufficient distance between the images placed in the memory theatre and without adequate differences between them (both with respect to their definitive shapes and also to what they are meant to signify), the whole tableau might well degenerate into a chaotic stream of unintelligible words and images.

William Fulwood, in his English version of Grataroli's celebrated memory treatise, voices this concern about the decorum of the internal arrangement of memory palaces—a concern first expressed in the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*:

And therefore I take or choose a great and emptie house, to the which you muste not go often but seldome, and appointe or sette the fyrste place which is at the doore, three foote distant from the doore. Let the second place be twelue or fyfteenne foote distant from that Let the thyrde place be distant from the seconde euen as many or twelue foote But yet remember that the dystaunce whyche is geuen is moderate and conuient³⁹

By the same token, the relation of the background to the image, which is to say the orderly arrangement of the designated symbolic images or emblems, is of central importance to the artificial memory system. Thus Plat cautions:

In euerie of these roomes you must place ten seuerall subiectes at a reasonable distaunce one from the other, least the neerenesse of their placing shoulde happen to confound your Memorie. Your subiectes must consist of Decades, whereof the first is a man, and the fifth a woman, or rather the wife of that man which beginneth the Decade. And by this meanes your first your fift, your tenth, your fifteenth, and your twentieth subiect, &c. Both forwarde and backward is easily brought to minde. (*Jewell House* sig. N1-N1v, pp. 81-82)

And in the *locus classicus* of the memory arts we are told:

We shall need to study with special care the backgrounds we have adopted so that they may cling lastingly in our memory, for the images, like letters, are effaced when we make no use of them, but the backgrounds, like wax tablets, should abide. And that we may by no chance err in the number of backgrounds, each fifth background should be marked. For example, if in the fifth we should set a golden hand, and in the tenth some acquaintance whose first name is Decimus, it will be easy to station like marks in each successive fifth background. (*Ad Her.* III.xviii)

Designing and appropriately appointing a viable memory theatre was made easier by ready access to a host of treasuries of emblems and epigrams (thesauri and other books of commonplaces) which served to supply inventions and to suggest ways of embellishing those already conceived. Therefore, after setting up the background, marking

off sections, and finding suitable emblems and symbols to deposit in the prepared places, it remained for the practitioner to see himself (perhaps reduced in scale) placed "inside" the imaginary construction. The entire memory theatre was "built" to fit the dimensions of one's body, and, once the mnemotechnician was "inside," he needed to keep all additional objects and their placement with respect to one another sufficiently "realistic" so as not to disrupt the orderly placement, retrieval and repossession of signs and symbols. This process is analogous to effectual "dream-work" as discussed by psychologists. And further, the creator (who was both the subject of and an object within such a system) had to make certain that the entire construct conformed to the rules of the mnemonic game. At times the stakes in this ludic operation were mortally serious, especially when used in the courts and pulpit. In the cases of Bruno, Kircher, and Camillo, the stakes were nothing less than the acquisition and transmission of the full range and extent of human knowledge.

From here it is a short step to seeing how such mnemonic schemes functioned in the other direction as well. The extension of such schemes from the mind and into the world came in many forms. For example, the most outstanding example in England is the Great Hall of *sententiae* built by Nicholas Bacon.⁴⁰ And there are examples of other stately homes of the period decorated with *sententiae* as well as with emblems and *imprese* so that a visitor to such a room felt as if he had entered an emblem book. For example, the lacunar ceiling of the "Haute Galerie" of Dampierre-sur-Boutonne, with its sixty-one emblems, is a typical manifestation of such an ornamental interior design.⁴¹ The Oratory of Lady Anne Drury is a more subdued English version of the same.⁴² Each vertical row of emblems in this chamber had a topical Latin heading, reminiscent of the commonplace book with its headings designating the areas of one's potential arguments or themes for future contemplation and elaboration. As Norman Farmer has astutely observed, it is "something like a memory theater employed for the recall and contemplation of particular truths."⁴³ Such a design for the arrangement of *sententiae*, with or without accompanying emblems, is consonant with the decorum of artificial memory schemes of the period.

It has been the aim of this manifesto to convince you that the fluid movement of emblematic conceits and mnemonic devices between the realm of the purely symbolic and the material world deserves further scholarly attention and analysis. Let me conclude by emphasizing what I believe characterizes this circuit of signification within and out from the Renaissance Memory Theatre. Above all else, the artificial memory operated always with respect to the image of oneself as both the subject and the object of the design. Further, emblems which functioned as mnemonic devices were the realization of conceits (of *conceitti*, of thought-images), and as such were the shadows of bodies of thought in the Renaissance imagination.⁴⁴ Mnemonic criticism provides a way for Renaissance scholars to recover some of these shadows because it enables us once again to see the source of the light, and to contemplate how these commonplace images were conceived, projected, and viewed.

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NOTES

¹Paolo Rossi, "Immagini e memoria locale nei secoli XIV e XV," *Rivista critica di storia della filosofia*, Fasc. II (1958): 149-91 and "La costruzione della immagini nei trattati di memoria artificiale del Rinascimento," *Umanesimo e simbolismo*, ed. E. Castelli (Padua: CEDAM, 1958) 161-78; and also Rossi's book-length study which brings together the topics of his previous articles, *Clavis Universalis: Arti della memoria e logica combinatoria de Lullo a Leibniz* (Bologna: Mulino, 1983); Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London, 1966; rpt. Penguin Books, 1978); Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York, 1984; rpt. Penguin Books, 1986).

²In addition to giving the English their first memory theater designed for every-day use, Willis is credited with devising the first practical and widely used system of shorthand writing. His system captured the interest of his contemporaries and, evidently, was widely studied. At the time of Willis's death in 1628, his *Art of Stenographie, or Short Writing by Spelling Characters* (first published in London, 1602) was in its ninth edition. By the mid-century, it was in its fourteenth edition, had been translated into Latin, and had generated a companion text, *The school-maister to the art of stenographie* (1622, 1628, and 1647).

³John Willis, *Mnemonica, sive Reminiscendi ars* (London, 1618), sig. B3-B3v; the translation is by Leonard Sowersby, *The Art of Memory* (London, 1661) sig. A3v-A4.

⁴John M. Steadman, *The Lamb and the Elephant: Ideal Imitation and the Context of Renaissance Allegory* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1974) 145; see also 132-33 and 144.

⁵For a good survey of some of the more prominent texts which come under this category, see Richard Kelly, "The Mnemonic Structuring of Mediaeval Literature," *The Oxford Literary Review* 3.1 (1978): 13-19.

⁶For a good introduction to this theme in general, see Alastair Fowler, *Triumphal Forms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). On Sidney, see Thomas P. Roche, "Astrophil and Stella: a Radical Reading," *Spenser Studies* 3 (1982): 139-91 on Sidney, and more recently his *Petrarch and the English Sonnet Sequence* (New York: AMS Press, 1989); and on Milton, Galbraith Miller Crump, *The Mystical Design of "Paradise Lost"* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1975).

⁷See William E. Engel, "Anecdote, Aphorism, and Anamnesis in Montaigne and Bacon," *Montaigne Studies* 1.1 (Winter 1990).

⁸Sir Francis Bacon, *The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall*, ed. Michael Kiernan (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985) xxxi-xlvii.

⁹Frank L. Huntley, "Sir Thomas Browne: The Relationship of *Urn Burial* and *The Garden of Cyrus*," *Studies in Philology* 53 (1956): 204-19.

¹⁰The connection between the *ars rhetorica* and the *ars memorativa* has been fully appreciated by Daniel Martin in his ground-breaking studies. See "Pour une lecture mnémonique des *Essais*: une image et un lieu," *Bulletin de la société des amis de Montaigne*, 5th series, 31-32 (1979): 51-58; and his later two-part exposition of this theme in "Démonstration mathématique de l'architecture des *Essais* de Montaigne" and "L'Idée du Théâtre de Camillo et les *Essais* de Montaigne" in *Bulletin de la société des amis de Montaigne*, 6th series, 7-8 (1981): 79-96. Martin regards the divisions of the essays themselves as rooms within a memory palace and demonstrates convincingly the parallel structure of *Essais* II, 16-22 and the seven "planetary stations" in Camillo's celebrated Memory Theater.

¹¹A. M. Guite, "The Art of memory and the Art of Salvation: The centrality of memory in the sermons of John Donne and Lancelot Andrewes," *Seventeenth Century Studies* 4.1 (1989): 1-17.

¹²Daniel Featley, *Clavis Mystica: A Key Opening Divers Difficult and Mysterious Texts of Holy Scripture; Handled in seventy sermons . . .* (London, 1636). All citations from the thirty-fifth sermon, on Exodus 28:15-21, "Four Rows of Precious Stones. A Rehearsall Sermon preached in Saint Maries Church at Oxford, Anno 1610," follow the Huntington Library's edition [#19969], and will be identified by page number in parentheses.

¹³On topics of invention, as I am discussing them here, see Joan Marie Lechner, *Renaissance Concepts of the Commonplaces* (New York: Pageant Press, 1962) esp. 70, 137, and 150-52; Miriam Joseph, "Topics of Invention," *Rhetoric in Shakespeare's Time* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1962) 308-353.

¹⁴See Frances A. Yates, "The Emblematic Conceit in Giordano Bruno's *De gli eroici furori* and in the Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 6 (1943): 101-21, esp. 103-105; and also Paul E. Memmo, Jr., "Giordano Bruno's *De gli eroici furori* and the Emblematic Tradition, *Romantic Review* 55 (1964): 1-15.

¹⁵On the rise of emblem-oriented literature, see the *Harvard College Library Catalogue of Books and Manuscripts*, Part 1, vol. 1, ed. Ruth Mortimer (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1964) 352. The literary implications of this much-recognized cultural phenomenon were first analyzed by Elbert N. S. Thompson, "Emblem Books," *Literary Bypaths of the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1924) 29-67; Rosemary Freeman's study remains unsurpassed in its perspicacious treatment of the emblem and the "taste for allegory" in the Renaissance, *English Emblem Books* (1948; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, 1978). More recently the work

of Peter Daly has dominated this field of study, especially his *Literature in the Light of the Emblem: Structural Parallels between the Emblem and Literature in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1973); and, also relevant to my observation about the popularity of emblem-oriented literature, see Karl Joseph Hölzger, *Aspects of the Emblem: Studies in the English Emblem Tradition and the European Context* (Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 1986) 26.

¹⁶E. M., *Ashrea* (1665); facsimile edition, ed. John Horden (Menston, Yorkshire: Scholar Press, 1970) sig. A11-A12.

¹⁷Henry Hawkins, *Parthenia Sacra* (London, 1633).

¹⁸On the exposition of the Table of Cebes as a memory theatre constructed out of a picture consisting of various icons and mottoes "hung vp before the doore of the Oratorie, containing very many strange, and vncooth resemblances," see Io. Healey, *Epictetos "Manuall."* Cebes "Table." Theophrastus "Characters." (London, 1616) sig. F5 and following.

¹⁹See Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, esp. 1-23, "Building the Palace."

²⁰See Yates, *Art of Memory* 17; Harry Caplan, "Memoria: Treasure House of Eloquence" (1955) reprinted in *Of Eloquence: Studies in Ancient and Mediaeval Rhetoric* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970) 222-23; Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers: A History of Man's Search to Know his World and Himself* (1983; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1985) 480-81.

²¹Today the formula "ut pictura poesis" is associated more frequently with Horace than with Simonides. See also Rensselaer W. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967).

²²Yates, *Art of Memory* 43.

²³Presumably the same prejudices still held in 1661 which Willis had sought to combat in 1618 and again in 1621. See Willis, *Mnemonica* (1618) sig. B2-B3; and Willis, *Art of Memory* (1661) sig. A3v.

²⁴Giovanni Brancacci, *Ars Memoriae Vindicata* (Panormi, 1702). (I am grateful to the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, for making this text available to me.)

²⁵On the importance of the arts of memory in Renaissance culture, see Boorstin 480-87; and for the suggestion that later men of action, like Wellington and Napoleon, may well have practiced some version of the theatre of memory, see John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (New York: Viking, 1987) 139.

²⁶See Plato, *Theaetatus* 152, 166c; Diogenes Laertius II.ix.51-53. On this translation, see Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 4, trans. Frank Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) 90.

²⁷Frances A. Yates, *Theatre of the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969) 20-59.

²⁸Vitruvius, *De Architectura* I.2. This citation follows the edition translated and edited by Frank Granger (1931; rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

²⁹This is the theme of a related essay, in which memory is treated as the correspondent term for Vitruvian "Proportion," the suitable display of details in their context, also known as *oconomia* (given the classical and Renaissance connotations of this term, it suggests also the management of one's household, or those elements constituting one's true character).

³⁰This and all future quotations from Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* follow the text of the Loeb Classical Library edition, translated by H. E. Butler (Cambridge,

Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1922; rpt. 1979), and will be identified by book and section number.

³¹Hugh Plat, *The Jewell House of Art and Nature* (London, 1594) sig. N, p. 81. See Bent Juel-Jensen, "Some Uncollected Authors, XIX: Sir Hugh Plat (?1552-?1611)," *The Book Collector* 8 (1959): 60-68: "Plat's writings are fascinating documents of the everyday life of an inquisitive and versatile man" and his *Jewel House of Art and Nature* is a "compendium of good advice on every conceivable topic."

³²Ravennas, *The Art of Memory, that otherwyse is called the Phenix* (1548?). The first edition, *Phoenix, siva artificiosa memoria* was published in Venice, 1491. A good, brief survey of Ravennas's importance in the promulgation of mnemotechnical methods to the extent that in the Renaissance he was considered an authority along with Cicero, Quintilian, and Thomas Aquinas, see Yates, *Art of Memory* 119-21.

³³Future citations from this treatise, attributed to Cicero in the Latin Middle Ages, follow the Loeb Classical Library edition, translated by Harry Caplan (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1954), and will be identified by book and chapter numbers.

³⁴See Cicero, *De Oratore* II.lxxxvi-II.lxxxvii.

³⁵Ravennas, *The Phenix* sig. A2v-A3.

³⁶Willis, *The Art of Memory* (London: W. Iones, 1621). See sig. B10v-B12, pp. 34-38, for a discussion of the use of the four kinds of "scriptile Ideas" in a memory system.

³⁷Willis, *Art of Memory* (1621) sig. C5-C5v, pp. 47-48; and see also Willis, *Mnemonic* (1618) sig. G3, p. 101.

³⁸Willis, *Art of Memory* (1661) sig. E2v-E3, pp. 52-53.

³⁹William Fulwood, *Castel of Memorie* (London, 1573), sig. F7v-F8r.

⁴⁰See Elizabeth McCutcheon's translation and outstanding study of "Nicholas Bacon's Great House *Sententiae*" in *English Literary Renaissance Supplements* 3 (1977).

⁴¹See Maria Antoinette de Angelis, "Emblems and Devices on a Ceiling in the Chateau of Dampierre-sur-Boutonne," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 46 (1983): 221-28 (illustrations on 32-35), 222. †

⁴²See Norman K. Farmer, Jr., *Poets and the Visual Arts in Renaissance England* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), chapter 7 "Lady Drury's Oratory: The Painted Closet from Hawstead Hall," 77-105.

⁴³Farmer, *Poets and the Visual Arts* 78.

⁴⁴See Robert Klein, "La Théorie de l'expression figurée dans les traités italiens sur les *imprese*, 1555-1612," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 19 (1957): 320-41, esp. 337.