

The arts of memory

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In a civilisation where we complain that no one learns poems by heart any more, and where this ability seems to be diminishing to the point of collective loss of historical memory, it is difficult to explain what an instrument of civilisation the art of memory has been.

It begins in ancient times, when orators and teachers did not have at their disposal - I won't say our current recording instruments - even printed books, manuscripts were voluminous and expensive, and wooden boards were either insufficient or untransportable. Therefore, people could only rely on their ability to memorize enormous amounts of data (names, lists of concepts, topics) and to support their memory with special techniques.

From classical antiquity (Aristotle, the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Cicero himself) through the Middle Ages and the centuries that followed, various *artes memoriae* were developed. This gave rise to a series of manuals, the history of which we have heard (and I refer to these works) from Paolo Rossi in his pioneering *Clavis Universalis* (Milan, Ricciardi, 1960 - now Bologna, Mulino, 1983) and, in 1966, from Frances Yates in his *The Art of Memory* (Turin, Einaudi, 1972).

Johannes Spangenberg in his *Libellus Artificiose Memoriae* (...) indicated the corruption or diminution of faculties through old age and illnesses among the causes that lead to forgetfulness. Techniques for memorisation could not counteract this decline, but could offer practical expedients to prevent or reduce corruption, or so-called "forgetfulness of past species".

In general, a mnemonic technique was to draw in one's mind any spatial structure (palace, city, territory) that would allow one to distinguish between different divisions and sectors. These sectors (streets, squares, corridors, rooms, staircases) were the "places" where images, which were easy to remember, were placed (e.g. familiar objects or, conversely, surprising things, creatures or events, such as statues representing terrible and horrific events, so that they could not be easily forgotten). At this point, each of these images had to be associated with the names or concepts one wished to remember (for example, the image of a scythe should refer to the problems of agriculture, or the image of a donkey, an elephant and a rhinoceros should refer to air, using the Italian acronym AER). In this way, the technique does not take into account the heritage of bizarre architectures, dreamscapes, strange images with which

the tradition of the arts of memory has filled pages and pages, first with verbal fantasies, then with illuminated images, and finally, after the invention of printing, with surreal engravings. Thus, between the Renaissance and the Baroque, when the existence of the book had made it possible to store knowledge in a less tiring way (but by then the ability to remember had become an intellectual capacity of the cultivated man), mnemonics went from being mere aids to remembering to becoming representations of universal knowledge, virtual encyclopaedias or "theatres of the world" (this happened, for example, with Giulio Camillo Delminio's project for a theatre of memory and with Giordano Bruno). In such context, both the set of images that help one to remember and the content that is remembered, and the correlation between the two, constitute a representation of the universe. Thus, mnemonics became the instrument of a world vision that explored the mysterious relationships of sympathy and similarity that exist between earthly and heavenly things, between the visible and the invisible world; they became part of hermetic and cabalist knowledge, partly losing their practical function but acquiring a metaphysical, religious and philosophical significance. Since the Renaissance, the *artes memoriae* no longer present themselves as mere practical tools, but as a syllogism of knowledge, of the *imago mundi*, starting from the principle that the world itself is a divine writing and that mnemotechnical devices do no more than reproduce the original cosmic "writing". If this is not understood, it will be difficult to accept the idea that these systems actually allowed one to remember anything, rather than confusing the mind by conjuring up a tangle of symbols and a labyrinth of analogies - and as early as the Renaissance, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa complained that such universal representations could lead mnemonics to the brink of madness. However, these treatises were no longer intended to make up for the shortcomings of memory, but rather to push the imagination towards new (or ancient) horizons of knowledge. Or, as in the case of Comenius, to develop new educational techniques. This highlights the significance of so many of these often basic pamphlets and their value to cultural historians (or cultural curiosities when, approaching our time, they become pure testimony to a die-hard ideal).

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