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THE BOOK OF MEMORY

Mary Carruthers's classic study of the training and uses of memory for a variety of purposes in European cultures during the Middle Ages has fundamentally changed the way scholars understand medieval culture. This fully revised and updated second edition considers afresh all the material and conclusions of the first. While responding to new directions in research inspired by the original, this new edition devotes much more attention to the role of trained memory in composition, whether of literature, music, architecture, or manuscript books. The new edition will reignite the debate on memory in medieval studies and, like the first, will be essential reading for scholars of history, music, the arts, and literature, as well as those interested in issues of orality and literacy (anthropology), in the working and design of memory (both neuropsychology and artificial memory), and in the disciplines of meditation (religion).

MARY CARRUTHERS is Remarque Professor of Literature at New York University and Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. She is also the author of *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge, 1998; paperback edition, 2000) and co-editor, with Jan M. Ziolkowski, of *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (2002).

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THE BOOK OF MEMORY

A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture

Second Edition

MARY CARRUTHERS

New York University

and

All Souls College, Oxford

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Preface to the second edition

Preparing a wholly new edition of work first undertaken more than twenty years ago has offered me an opportunity to rethink, recast, correct, and generally reassess the conclusions I offered in 1990. It is a task that carries mixed rewards. I have resisted my initial temptation to rewrite the entire thing from the beginning – this book cannot be started again. Published some eighteen years ago, translated entirely or in part into several other languages, and cited in many contexts by scholars with a great diversity of interests, it has a life of its own now and my control over it is limited. So the book begins as it did before, and the general ordering of the materials is unchanged. But each sentence and note has been reconsidered. I hope this has resulted in greater correctness in the translations and citations, increased felicity of style and clarity of presentation. I have also, however, updated the content when new scholarship has made old conclusions untenable. And I have added material to some of my analyses, reduced some discussions, and expanded others. The images selected for reproduction are somewhat different. I have also updated the notes and bibliography, to incorporate translations and editions that have appeared since I did my original research, and scholarly discussions that have matured over the past dozen years.

I wrote in 1989 that *The Book of Memory* was to be the first of three. It seemed an audacious promise at the time, but in fact it turned out to be truthful. *The Craft of Thought* (1998) examined an earlier medieval period, and focused even more particularly on the inventive and creative nature of recollection as it was cultivated in the practices of monastic reading and composition. An anthology of English translations of many of the medieval texts that had proved important in this history, *The Medieval Craft of Memory*, followed in 2002, prepared with my good friend Jan Ziolkowski, a consummate scholar of medieval Latin, and with the keen participation as translators and annotators of several members of his medieval Latin literature seminar.

Inevitably, as I have continued to work over the two decades intervening since *The Book of Memory* was first published, my own understanding of

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medieval memory culture (as it has come to be called) has changed and deepened. In this edition, I have adjusted and corrected more than just my Latin translations. I have come to understand far more clearly the place which the craft of memory training, *memoria artificialis*, had in medieval education, its perceived strengths, its accepted limitations, and most importantly its status as an instrument of thought, employing particular devices for specific goals and uses. *Ars memorativa* is not itself theoretical, though, like all crafts, it has its general principles. Two themes in particular stand out, which I did not focus on in the earlier edition, and it may be helpful to point them out now.

Though I did not know it at the time, *The Book of Memory* appeared just as interest was picking up in issues of memory and forgetting, particularly in relation to historical narratives of various sorts and to monuments. *The Book of Memory* was swept into this concern, although in fact the subject with which it dealt had little directly to do with monuments, and, while it certainly had a bearing on the construction of historical narratives, it was not directly illuminating of the issues of material selection and presentation that have most concerned historians like Pierre Nora, Patrick Geary, and Jean-Claude Schmitt. In rhetoric, memory craft is a stage in composing a work; presupposed is the axiom that recollection is an act of investigation and recreation in the service of conscious artifice. Its practitioners would not have been surprised to learn what was to them already obvious: that recollection is a kind of composition, and by its very nature is selective and formal.

Analysts of the postmodern have been particularly concerned for the past decade with issues of forgetting, which they often ally with issues of trauma and repression, as though remembering everything were the natural and desirable human condition, and forgetting was due to various psychic pathologies, if not to outright political immorality. In this postmodern presentation, the arts of memory have fared badly, the very idea of a memory art dismissed as a hoax or at best a chimerical quest. But the rush to condemn has itself created a historical illusion. For ancient and medieval writers supposed that human memories were by nature imperfect, and that humans recollected best by applying their reasoning abilities. These in turn could be aided by certain learned practices that build on some natural principles they had observed, concerning how people best learn and construct their thoughts and other artifacts.

St Augustine writes:[1]

I arrive in the fields and vast mansions of memory, where are treasured innumerable images brought in there from objects of every conceivable kind perceived by

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the senses. There too are hidden away the modified images we produce when by our thinking we magnify or diminish or in any way alter the information our senses have reported. There too is everything else that has been consigned and stored away and not yet engulfed and buried in oblivion . . . The huge repository of the memory, with its secret and unimaginable caverns, welcomes and keeps all these things, to be recalled and brought out for use when needed; and as all of them have their particular ways into it, so all are put back again in their proper places . . . This I do within myself in the immense court of my memory, for there sky and earth and sea are readily available to me, together with everything I have ever been able to perceive in them, apart from what I have forgotten.

"[A]part from what I have forgotten": in the cheerful admission of that phrase lies an essential difference between a modern and a medieval understanding of the cognitive function of memory. To have forgotten things is seen by us now as a failure of knowledge, however ordinary a failure it may be, and therefore a reason to distrust the power of memory altogether. Yet to have forgotten some things was understood in Augustine's culture as a necessary condition for remembering others. It is helpful to distinguish two sorts of forgetting, resulting from different causes. There is the kind that results from failing to imprint something in the first place – the sort Augustine seems to be talking about here. This should not even be called forgetting because, as Aristotle remarked in his discussion of memory and recollection, one cannot be properly said to have forgotten something that was never there in the first place.

On the other hand, there is deliberate or selective forgetting, the sort of forgetting that itself results from an activity of memory. In the passage I have just quoted, Augustine is certainly speaking of a consciously trained memory, one whose denizens, like prey (for he often speaks of memories as being like animals hunted from their lairs, whose tracks or vestiges are to be followed through their familiar pathways in the forest), can be rationally sought out via their particular paths when needed for use, and then returned to their proper places when finished with. But this edifice, this vast treasury, is chosen and constructed. It is a work of art, using the materials of nature as all arts do, but consciously crafted for some human use and purpose.

In his book on *Memory, History, Forgetting*, the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, himself a profound student of Augustine, complained that arts of memory are "an outrageous denial of forgetfulness and . . . of the weaknesses inherent in both the preservation of [memory] traces and their evocation."[2] In a similar vein, Harald Weinrich in *Lethe*, a book that sweeps engagingly over the theme of forgetting in canonical Western literature, states that *ars*

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memorativa represents itself to be "an art that can serve to overcome forgetting."[3] And he archly observes that in its celebrated advice about making multi-compartmental structures for a rich trove of remembered matters, "only forgetting has no place." But, as Augustine makes abundantly clear, Weinrich is wrong about that. Not only does forgetting have its honored place in an examination of *memoria* – indeed Augustine devotes a whole section of his discussion to the paradox that he can remember that he has forgotten something (*Confessions* x.16) – but forgetting, of a sort, is essential to constructing an art of memory in the first place.

Aristotle distinguishes clearly between the objects of memory and the investigative search, in his treatise "On memory and recollection" in the *Parva naturalia*, a matter I have dwelt on at some length in Chapter 2, and that is fundamental to all later analysis of the psychological processes of memory. This distinction is germane to the seeming lack of concern with forgetting in pre-modern teaching on memory, because the main focus of the arts of memory is on recollection – the search for stuff already there– and not on the representation of the object remembered. One can demonstrate this emphasis from the so-called *artes oblivionales* found in a few late humanist treatises on memory art. The "oblivion" discussed is to do with how to refresh one's search networks, not with worries about the accuracy or partialness of one's memories. As Lina Bolzoni has commented, "The techniques for forgetting handed down by the treatises are testimony to the persistence and power of the images," for they address the tasks of sorting out and reducing the number of memory places rather than with suppressing or otherwise editing content one has previously learned.[4]

Another matter to which the first edition gave much too short a shrift is the place of rote memorization – memorizing by heart – in the edifice of an ancient and medieval education. Most students of the arts of memory (including, when I began, me) have made a basic error when considering the relationship of memory craft to rote learning, by thinking both to be methods for initially memorizing the basic contents of educated memory. We have all been in good company in this confusion, for even the seventeenth-century Jesuit, Matteo Ricci, who practiced an art of memory, elided the two when he tried to teach his art as a helpful device for passing the content-based examinations of the Chinese imperial civil service.[5] Where this analysis went wrong was in supposing that learning an art for memory was intended as an alternative to rote learning, and in misunderstanding the ancient mnemotechnical term *memoria verborum* as a synonym for the verbatim memorization of long texts.

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Matteo Ricci's Chinese hosts were on the right track when they complained that memorizing a scheme of memory places and cues added far too burdensome and confusing a task to the already difficult one of memorizing by rote – why memorize things twice? Why indeed. That simple question is the heart of the matter. In revising *The Book of Memory*, I have tried to set out the answer plainly in Chapter 3, during my discussion of Hugh of St Victor's preface to his elementary tables of the names and dates of Biblical history, addressed to the *pueri* or students of St. Victor in about 1135, after he had composed *Didascalicon*, his treatise on the goals and methods of education.[6]

It is with some chagrin that I realize now how wrong I was about this and for how long. When I first came across Hugh's preface in the early 1980s, I recognized that it offered the clearest presentation of an art of memory extant, much clearer than that in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* – and also completely different in its details, though not in its basic principles. Seeking to understand it, I spent several months, while commuting to work in Chicago on the elevated train, memorizing psalms with the method Hugh described. I attached pieces of the texts I already knew by heart to the places I had created by using a mentally imposed grid system which was exactly that of the chapter and verse scheme of a modern printed Bible. I realized quickly that doing so gave me complete flexibility and security in finding the verses again in whatever order I chose. I could reverse the order, pull out all the odd-numbered verses, or all the even-numbered ones, or alternate reciting the odd verses in forward order and the even ones in reverse. I could also mentally interleave and recite the verses of one psalm with those of another. Bewitched by my new-found skill (I even once began a lecture by interleaving the verses of Psalm 1 in reverse order with those of psalm 23 in forward order), I overlooked the fact that I wasn't actually memorizing the words for the first time. I was instead imposing a divisional system onto something I already knew by heart.

This was a crucial ingredient of the method's success, though I failed to pay proper attention to it in my initial analysis. I did note that, for the quickest and most secure results, I needed to say the psalm text in English (and in the 1611 version which I learned as a child) and that I also needed to call up "The Lord is my shepherd" by its number in the Protestant Bible (23), not the Vulgate (22). What I was demonstrating was the power of such mental devices as finding tools rather than as retention devices. In fact, it was easy to impose such a scheme on material I already knew by heart (in King James English) because, with a bit of review and practice, the cues provided to my memory by just a few words of the texts I knew so securely brought out the whole quotation. Once started, my rote memory took over,

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and by conscious habit produced what I needed, very much in the manner of the Read-Only memory of a computer. The recollection devices of mnemonic art, like a Random-Access structure, took me where I wanted to go, in the order I had chosen and in the directions my mind had given to itself.

Many people have asked me over the years if memory arts really work. The answer to that is yes – if you know how to use them. They are not a pill or potion, and those who attempt to sell them as if they were are as fraudulent as any fake medicine purveyor. Nor can they be patented, or licensed to others like the secret recipe for a special sauce. All teachers of the subject, from the days of Cicero and his Greek masters, have made just these same points. It is amusing to me to read now in the science press some breathless accounts of how to improve memory by using the amazing Method of Loci, or to hear of efforts to introduce into schools a patented memory curriculum, guaranteeing improved learning for all. Some things never change . . .

Certainly, were I to begin *The Book of Memory* today, I would do it differently, but that is the way of scholarship. I have left the Introduction to the first edition unchanged, partly to measure just how much good work has been done in the subject since those words were first written in 1989. Most of this work has come from historians – of art and architecture, of music, of rhetoric, of law, of reading and of the book, of monasticism and religion, and of literature both in Latin and in vernaculars – but some as well has come, gratifyingly if astonishingly to me, from psychologists, anthropologists, neuroscientists, and computer designers. It did not occur to me when I began the project that it would resonate so broadly, nor that I would find myself keeping delightful intellectual company for so long a time with so wide a spectrum of scholar-scientists. Their friendship and collegiality towards me and my subsequent work has nourished and enriched me more than I could ever hope to acknowledge adequately. Most appear in my notes and bibliography, the site of our continuing conversations. One individual needs to be named: Linda Bree, literature editor at Cambridge University Press, who kept after me with unfailing good humor and gentle persistence until this work was done. Thank you. Three institutions also should be thanked: the University of Oxford and its unparalleled community of medievalists who have made me one of their own; the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, with whose support I was able to continue this work and begin new projects; and New York University, my familiar base in the city that has been my home for so long.

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Abbreviations

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AASS	*Acta Sanctorum*
Ad Her.	[Cicero], *Rhetorica ad Herennium*
AMRS	Arizona Medieval and Renaissance Studies
Avi. Lat.	Avicenna (Ibn Sinna) latinus
CCCM	Corpus christianorum continuatio medievalis
CCSL	Corpus christianorum series latina
CHB	*The Cambridge History of the Bible*
Conf.	St. Augustine, *Confessiones*
CSEL	Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum
DTC	*Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*
Du Cange	C. Du Cange *et al.*, *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*
EETS	The Early English Text Society
Etym.	Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum libri*
Inst. orat.	Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*
JMRS	*Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (now *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*)
JWCI	*Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
Lewis and Short	C. T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary*
Liddell and Scott	H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*
MED	*The Middle English Dictionary*
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae historica
MRTS	Medieval and Renaissance Texts Series
OED	*The Oxford English Dictionary*
Ox. Lat. Dict.	*The Oxford Latin Dictionary*
PG	Patrologia cursus completus series graeca. Compiled by J.-P. Migne. Paris, 1857–1866.
PIMS	Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies (Toronto)

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PL	Patrologia cursus completus series latina. Compiled by J.-P. Migne. Paris, 1841–1864.
SC	Sources chrétiennes
ST	St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*
STC	*A Short-Title Catalogue* (Pollard and Redgrave)
TLL	*Thesaurus linguae latinae*

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