

# THE ART OF MEMORY RECONCEIVED: FROM RHETORIC TO PSYCHOANALYSIS

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Mnemonics, or the art of memory, is today regarded as an arcane intellectual interest. It functions on the periphery of popular culture, largely through a literature of self-help designed to bolster the confidence of people insecure about their powers of recollection. If it is a useful skill, it is not an essential one in a civilization whose collective memory is stored securely in the printed word. Today's archive for reliable reference is the library or the computer, not the depths of a well-ordered mind. Yet there was a time in the not too distant past when the art of memory held pride of place in the councils of learning, for it enhanced one's power to lecture or preach in a world that trusted in the authority of the spoken word. From the wandering rhapsodes of ancient Greece who enthralled listeners with the epic tales of Homer to the philosophers of the Renaissance who constructed imaginary memory palaces to present their intricate designs of the cosmos, the development of the powers of memory was perceived to be an essential intellectual skill.

The art of memory as it was traditionally conceived was based upon associations between a structure of images easily remembered and a body of knowledge in need of organization. The mnemonist's task was to attach the facts he wished to recall to images that were so visually striking or emotionally evocative that they could be recalled at will. He then classified these images in an architectural design of places with which he was readily familiar. The memoryscape so constructed was an imaginary tableau in which a world of knowledge might be contained for ready reference. It was in effect a borrowed paradigm, the logic of whose imaginary structure gave shape to the otherwise formless knowledge he wished to retain.<sup>1</sup>

Most professional psychologists today dismiss mnemonics as irrelevant to the concerns of their discipline. Some are puzzled by the elaborate and seemingly cumbersome systems of recall employed by mnemonists through the ages, and question whether the systems themselves might not be more difficult to remember than the facts to be committed to memory. Others, while conceding the efficacy of schemes that help us to retrieve facts in serial order, regard mnemonics as a skill with relatively

<sup>1</sup> For a good example of how the art of memory was applied, see Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York, 1984), 1-23.

few contemporary applications.<sup>2</sup> The study of the mind of an unusually gifted mnemonist by the distinguished Russian neuropsychologist Aleksandr Luria is a case in point.<sup>3</sup> The subject of his study, Shereshevskii, entertained audiences across Russia during the 1930s with his capacity to commit to memory any data with which they wished to test his talent, including long lists of random monosyllables or the elements of complex, sometimes incorrect, mathematical equations. He could still recall such information without prompting a decade later. Shereshevskii possessed what Luria characterized as a "marked degree of synesthesia," i.e., acute sensory perception that heightened his capacity to remember ideas by virtue of the vivid imagery that he could attach to them.<sup>4</sup> Yet Shereshevskii lacked the capacity for abstraction and the agility of mind essential for success in the modern world. Tormented by a clutter of facts that he could forget only through an enormous effort of will, he found his gift a burden. Unable to hold an ordinary job, he plied the trade of a showman for want of something better to do.<sup>5</sup> It is as if Shereshevskii were for Luria a clinical psychological find, akin to an anthropologist's discovery of a stone-age tribe in some remote jungle. One might admire the mnemonist's genius while recognizing its obsolescence. If the art of memory was an essential technique of learning for yesterday's rhetoricians, it has become for today's psychologists the stuff of sideshows.

In focusing upon the practical techniques of mnemonics, however, the psychologists have overlooked its theoretical foundations. The art of memory as it was understood in its classical formulation provided not only a useful skill but also a way of understanding the world. For some mnemonists the design of the structure of their mnemonic system corresponded to their conception of the structure of knowledge and so implied a vision of the world. The power of the mnemonist lay in his ability to interpret the world through a paradigm that would provide its initiates with a *clavis universalis*, a master key to the workings of the universe.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective the art of memory was not only a pedagogical device but also a method of interpretation. It is this link between the art of memory and the making of paradigms of cultural understanding that suggests the larger significance of this topic. If the art of memory as it was employed from classical antiquity until the Renaissance seems

<sup>2</sup> The psychologist's disdain for mnemonics is discussed by B. Richard Bugelski, "Mnemonics," in the *International Encyclopedia of Psychiatry, Psychology, Psychoanalysis, and Neurology*, ed. Benjamin B. Wolman (New York, 1977), VII, 245-50.

<sup>3</sup> Aleksandr R. Luria, *The Mind of a Mnemonist*, trans. Lynn Solotaroff (Chicago, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-73, 111-36, 149-60; cf. Michel Beaujour, *Miroirs d'encre* (Paris, 1980), 93-105.

<sup>6</sup> Paolo Rossi, *Clavis universalis: Arti mnemoniche e logica combinatoria da Lullo a Leibniz* (Milan, 1960).

cumbersome in comparison with our present mental operations and remote from our current needs, we may ask whether the art's intimate association with model-building has not enabled it to survive in the modern world in a different guise.

This essay will inquire into this revisioning of the art of memory since the eighteenth century. It will search for correspondences between the art of memory as it was practiced in the rhetorical tradition that culminated in the Renaissance and the use of memory as a technique of soul-searching in the Romantic tradition of psychology that culminates in psychoanalysis. Two figures especially are prominent in explaining this transition: the eighteenth-century Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico, who relates the power of memory to the poetic consciousness in which civilization began, and the Austrian physician Sigmund Freud, who pressed the search for memory's sources into the recesses of the unconscious mind. Just as the mnemonists of the Renaissance sought to convey to their initiates a hidden knowledge of the world, so this essay seeks to show how the art of memory itself is hidden in the rhetoric of more recent forms of intellectual discourse.

For an understanding of what the art of memory was in the distant past, the work of the English historian Frances Yates is essential.<sup>7</sup> Yates was a student of the intellectual underground of the Renaissance and her study of mnemonics was an offshoot of her inquiry into the thought of Giordano Bruno, a sixteenth-century Neapolitan philosopher whose fascination with systems of memory had roots in the ancient hermetic tradition of gnostic thought.<sup>8</sup> Yates was intrigued with the Renaissance revival of the art of memory at a time when one might suppose the advent of printing would have rendered it obsolete. In the course of her investigations she traced mnemonics as a system of artificial memory to its origins in Greece in the fifth century B.C. From its simple beginnings in the rhetoric of sophistry to its sophisticated refinement in the hermetic cosmology of the Renaissance, Yates explains, the art of memory was employed in the service of diverse philosophies. In Greco-Roman times it enhanced the rhetorician's eloquence. During the High Middle Ages it was used to classify an increasingly complex scheme of ethics. By the Renaissance it had become intertwined with Neoplatonic metaphysics. Yet through all of these cultural transformations, Yates stresses, the techniques of the art of memory remained essentially the same.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, across these 2000 years a sense of a classical mnemonic tradition developed, as each restatement of the art alluded to earlier formulations,

<sup>7</sup> Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago, 1966).

<sup>8</sup> Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago, 1964), and "The Hermetic Tradition in Renaissance Science," in *Art, Science and History in the Renaissance*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore, 1967), 255-74.

<sup>9</sup> Yates, *Art of Memory*, xi-xii, 145, 151.

notably to the *Ad Herennium*, an anonymous Roman tract written about 82 B.C., and even to that of its legendary Greek founder, the poet Simonides of Ceos, who was the first to reflect upon the emotional power of a system of images as an aid to memory.<sup>10</sup>

The techniques of artificial memory that Yates identifies with the classical tradition of mnemonics were essentially the same as those that the modern mnemonist Shereshevskii devised intuitively. They consisted of arrangements of places and images. The places provided an architectural design in which the knowledge to be remembered was to be situated. These were places so deeply embedded in the mind of the mnemonist that they could not be forgotten. The architecture of place, often conceived as a palace or a theater, might be likened to a sacred space with which the mnemonist possessed intuitive familiarity. This deep structure of memory, in turn, was given its particular character by the images with which it was adorned. A good memory was a function of a resilient imagination, and images were chosen for their aesthetic appeal. Vivid pictorial imagery that inspired awe was judged to be the most effective.<sup>11</sup>

If the techniques of the art of memory remained essentially the same, change was interpreted in terms of the purposes for which the art was used. Yates explains that these oscillated between two theories of knowledge, one derived from Aristotle and the other from Plato. In the Aristotelian tradition the art of memory was merely instrumental. Aristotle taught that knowledge is derived from sense experience and that a mnemonic system is to be judged by its practical capacity to fix knowledge in images that heighten sense perception. Whether mnemonic images possessed any correspondence of meaning to the ideas to be conveyed was irrelevant. This conception was especially popular during the High Middle Ages, when scholastic philosophers valued memory systems for their utility in communicating moral lessons, yet held them in suspicion because of their derivation from the pagan learning of classical civilization. Mnemonics was a profane art, always subordinate to the sacred message it carried.<sup>12</sup> In the Platonic tradition, however, the powers of memory were judged to be more substantive. Plato taught that mnemonic images were directly expressive of a transcendental reality. For the mnemonist who shared these views, the value of a mnemonic image was directly

<sup>10</sup> Simonides (ca. 556-468 B.C.), according to legend, discovered the mnemonic power of pictorial images when he, a guest at a palace banquet, fortuitously exited just before the palace collapsed. Awestruck at his good fortune, he found that his emotional reaction to the experience enabled him to conjure up a vivid and detailed picture of the banquet's participants in their assigned places just before the crash. Thus he discovered that ideas difficult to remember can be systematically committed to memory by associating them with unforgettable images. *Ibid.*, 1-2, 22. See also Herwig Blum, *Die antike Mnemotechnik* (Hildesheim, 1969), 41-46.

<sup>11</sup> Yates, *Art of Memory*, 2-26.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-36, 230.

tied to the ideal reality that it was empowered to represent. The art of memory, therefore, was a way of establishing correspondences between the microcosm of the mind's images and the macrocosm of the ideal universe, which were believed to be congruent structures. In such a conception, the role of the mnemonist took on added importance. Not only did he practice a skill, but he also assumed a priestly status as an interpreter of the nature of reality.<sup>13</sup>

This Platonic conception of the art of memory, Yates explains, received its fullest expression during the Italian Renaissance of the sixteenth century. In that era Neoplatonic philosophers employed the art of memory in an ambitious quest for a unified paradigm of knowledge. Among many ingenious designs, Yates singles out for special attention the mnemonic systems of Giulio Camillo and of Giordano Bruno, both of whom were in search of the key to the hidden structure of the universe in the hermetic teachings of the ancient Egyptian divine, Hermes Trismegistus. Camillo designed a memory theater in which the drama of all human experience was played out on an imaginary stage.<sup>14</sup> Bruno's model was more intricate still. Devising a memory wheel that incorporated geometrical designs borrowed from the best mnemonic systems of the day, he conceived of himself as the architect of a synthetic paradigm of the universe that would provide its practitioners with insight into the deep structural unity of all knowledge of heaven and earth.<sup>15</sup>

It is not surprising that these Neoplatonic paradigms were presented in images of wheels, palaces, theaters, and other geometrical configurations. The structure of knowledge envisioned by the Neoplatonic philosopher was spacial. It was based upon an unchanging reality, as all of these mnemonic images implied. Journeys into the memory moved along fixed trajectories to be travelled again and again. The wheel, the palace, and the theater were mementos of repetition. Working from a conception of a timeless cosmos, the Neoplatonic mnemonist possessed no sense of development. He was in search of knowledge that was eternal yet presently hidden. Discovered by the gnostic philosophers of antiquity yet forgotten in the intervening millennium, this hermetic knowledge was waiting to be revealed once more. As the purveyor of secrets at once ancient and powerful, the mnemonist viewed himself as a magus, dealing in an esoteric knowledge that made him privy to the workings of the universe, with all of the powers that such omniscience implied.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-39.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-59.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 199-230, and Yates, *Collected Essays* (London, 1983), II, 101-11.

<sup>16</sup> Yates, *Art of Memory*, 251-60, 293-99, 339-41; cf. Robert S. Westman, "Magical Reform and Astronomical Reform: The Yates Thesis Reconsidered," in *Hermeticism and the Scientific Revolution*, ed. Robert S. Westman and J. E. McGuire (Los Angeles, 1977), 5-72, challenging Yates's thesis about the magical implications of Bruno's cosmological design.

As a paradigmatic expression of the world-view of the idealist philosophers of the Renaissance, mnemonics survived into the seventeenth century because it served a line of intellectual inquiry that continued to display vitality. Mnemonics would begin to lose its honored status only as Neoplatonic idealism was successfully challenged by scientific empiricism in the course of that century. The new science, Yates suggests, would continue to employ the art of memory but in a less exalted role. In a world in which reliable knowledge was identified with a systematic understanding of sense experience, mnemonics was destined to return to an Artistotelian formulation. Herein lies the importance of the English philosopher Francis Bacon. Rejecting the notion of magical correspondences between mnemonic images and the powers governing the heavens, Bacon spurned the prideful role of magus for the more modest one of scientific investigator.<sup>17</sup> Having contributed to the rise of science in its stress upon systematic classification, Yates contends, mnemonics lost this distinguishing characteristic as the scientific method acquired an autonomous identity.<sup>18</sup> Having outlived its usefulness, the art of memory as a recognizable intellectual tradition came to an end.<sup>19</sup>

Yates persuasively explains the eclipse of the art of memory. But if the art had contributed so powerfully to the paradigmatic expression of such a variety of world-views popular in earlier periods of Western civilization, would not its imaging resources be appropriated to advance new schemes of knowledge in the modern age? The science into which the classical art of memory was absorbed was a science of nature. By the eighteenth century, however, a new science of humanity was in the making, and it was in this context that the art of memory was to be reconceived. The central figure in this revisioning of the role of memory in culture was the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico. Vico's conception of memory, as it had been for the Renaissance Neoplatonists, was tied to a search for deep structures of knowledge hidden from contemporary humankind.<sup>20</sup> But for Vico such knowledge was hidden in the

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 370-73, and Yates, *Collected Essays*, III, 60-66. See also Paolo Rossi, *Francis Bacon: From Magic to Science*, tr. Sacha Rabinovitch (London, 1968), 207-14.

<sup>18</sup> Yates, *Art of Memory*, 368-69, 378-89.

<sup>19</sup> Anachronistic applications of the art of memory nonetheless survived into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Representative approaches include: Gregor von Feinaigle, *The New Art of Memory* (London, 1813); Aimé Paris, *Principes et applications diverses de la mnémonique* (7th ed.; Paris, 1833); A. E. Middleton, *Memory Systems, Old and New* (3rd rev. ed.; New York, 1888); Laird S. Cermak, *Improving Your Memory* (New York, 1975); and Harry Lorayne, *Harry Lorayne's Page-a-Minute Memory Book* (New York, 1985).

<sup>20</sup> On Vico's relationship to Renaissance Neoplatonic mnemonics, cf. Paolo Rossi, "Schede Vichiane," *La Rassegna della letteratura italiana*, 62 (1958), 375-83, and Francis Bacon, 77-79, 133-34; Emile Namer, "G. B. Vico et Giordano Bruno," *Archives de philosophie*, 40 (1977), 107-14; and Donald Phillip Verene, "L'Originalità filosofica di Vico," in *Vico oggi*, ed. Andrea Battistini (Rome, 1979), 114-17. On the roots of Vico's

origins of civilization, a lost history of human creation, not in the heavens as an expression of God's design. The Renaissance Neoplatonists had taught that the magi of antiquity were in possession of an occult wisdom that put them in touch with the divine plan. The ancients, Vico explains, did possess wisdom, but it was a wisdom of poetry not philosophy. The ancient poets were magi of sorts, seeking to divine the mysteries of the universe. What they discovered in the process were their own human powers of understanding and acting. What the art of memory in Vico's *New Science* (1744) promised to provide was a key to this poetic knowledge.<sup>21</sup>

Vico's vision of the world was historical rather than cosmological, and his work is significant for this study because he was the first philosopher to explain the historical origins of the art of memory. If the art had hitherto been understood in spatial imagery, he would recast it in a temporal design. For Vico the art of memory was more than a technique invented by Simonides. Simonides and the classical rhetoricians who embellished his teachings were only restating the principles of an art that had been intuitively understood since the dawn of civilization. The artificial memory systems employed by rhetoricians since the classical age were but studied variations on the poetic structure of language employed spontaneously by primitive peoples. Mnemonics, therefore, is no more than a refinement of the poetic logic of memory, grounded in the primordial structures of poetic expression.<sup>22</sup>

The key to understanding the nature of memory, Vico contends, is derived from the direct correspondence between image and idea in primitive poetic language. In the beginnings of civilization, image and idea were one. Primitive peoples possessed robust memories because of the inseparable association they made between images and ideas in their comprehension of the world. They thought metaphorically, and the metaphors that they uttered were easily mimicked and remembered because they were richly expressive, grandiose, and full of wonder at the world. The link between human imagination and the universe that the Renaissance Neoplatonists had sought to discover magically, Vico revealed to have been born historically in the development of human consciousness.<sup>23</sup>

The source of the mnemonist's method is visible in the poetic logic

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"tree of knowledge" in mnemonic imagery, see Giorgio Tagliacozzo, "General Education as Unity of Knowledge: A Theory Based on Vichian Principles," *Social Research*, 43 (1976), 772, 774 n.30.

<sup>21</sup> *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (3rd ed.; 1744), tr. and ed. Thomas G. Bergin and Max H. Fisch (Ithaca, 1970), 331, 342, 349, 374-83, 391, 494, 846; hereafter *NS*, (reference to numbered paragraph).

<sup>22</sup> *NS*, 201, 211, 699, 811, 819, 833, 855, 878, 896 contain Vico's principal references to memory.

<sup>23</sup> *NS*, 221, 700, 814, 816, 819, 833, 933. On the role of memory in Vico's theory of mind, see Donald Phillip Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca, 1981), 96-126.

of Vico's theory of the emergence of human consciousness. That theory, too, involves the relationship between places and images, which Vico labels topics and tropes. Topics were the poetic formulae through which primitive people identified the phenomena of the world.<sup>24</sup> As imaginative representations of particular aspects of reality, they provided common-places or fixed points of reference amidst the flux of sense experience. As topics multiplied, they came to constitute a structure of the perception of reality. Topics were in effect the groundwork of an emerging field of knowledge. For Vico consciousness develops out of the formulation of topics in imaginary expressions known as tropes. Originally, all topics were interpreted metaphorically. But the use of metaphor was itself a selection of a particular image in which to represent a topic, and the human capacity to be selective was gradually refined. As their knowledge of topics became more extensive, humans learned to express themselves in an imaginative shorthand that modified metaphor: first in terms of metonymy (an eidetic image of a detail that stands for a complete metaphorical topic); then of synecdoche (an image that conveys the character or quality of a topic); and finally of irony (an image that has acquired a generalized meaning of its own, without reference to the particular topic to which it originally had been attached).<sup>25</sup> The development of consciousness, therefore, is for Vico a process of abstraction in which the distance between topics (places) and tropes (images) widens until the metaphorical origins of a topic are forgotten in the ironical imagery of modern discourse. The process of abstraction that inheres in the development of consciousness, therefore, is one of forgetting the connection between our present vocabularies and the poetic process through which they were originally formed. As Vico expressed it in a poetic image of his own, "metonymy drew a cloak of learning over the prevailing ignorance of these origins of human institutions, which have remained buried until now."<sup>26</sup>

Considered in this context, Vico's new art of memory becomes a retrospective search for the connection between our present conceptions and the lost poetic images out of which they were born. In the logic of Vichian poetics, the new art of memory is a reconstruction of the imaginative process by which the poets of antiquity gave shape to their perception of the world. Therein the imaginative sources of our present ideas are to be found. The original topic might be likened to a palimpsest, repeatedly covered over with more abstract imagery as the human mind historically ascended the tropological gradient of linguistic expression.

<sup>24</sup> *NS*, 297-98, 699, 768. Cf. Yates, *Art of Memory*, 31.

<sup>25</sup> *NS*, 236, 331, 404-11. See also Hayden V. White, "The Tropics of History: The Deep Structure of the *New Science*," in *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Donald Phillip Verene (Baltimore, 1976,) 65-85.

<sup>26</sup> *NS*, 402.



Vico's art of memory was to decipher each tropological layer along the way until the original metaphorical topic, long forgotten, was recalled to mind.<sup>27</sup>

We might say that what Vico offers is a model of the life-cycle of memory. Memory originates in the ontological act of creating images in order to give form and meaning to the phenomena of the world. But as civilization advances, memory comes to be identified with mimesis, i.e., mimicking or repeating the creative act in order to discover its original meaning.<sup>28</sup> Such meanings elude the modern philosopher, who does not understand the historical circumstances in which topics originated or the way in which the mind has been altered in the interim.<sup>29</sup> Vico's theory of memory as an act of interpretation that enables us to establish connections between the familiar images of the present and the unfamiliar ones of the past anticipates the modern science of hermeneutics.<sup>30</sup> Vico describes the hermeneutical process as it was understood metaphorically by the ancients in their image of the god Hermes. Hermes was the messenger of the gods, and he taught humankind the art of communication. He did so by travelling from familiar into strange places and back again. Hermes taught humans to understand the unfamiliar by relating it to the familiar. The ancient poet interpreted the world creatively by explaining strange phenomena in terms of images that he knew well, initially images of his own body. He created new images to explain new experiences but always related these to his extant structure of knowledge. The contemporary philosopher, Vico argued, must use his memory to reverse the process. He must return from the rational discourse in which he is presently at home into the alien poetic idiom of the past whose meaning he will rediscover as he establishes connections with its imagery. In descending the tropological gradient of linguistic expression, the new art of memory completes the hermeneutical circle, the circle of Hermes' flight and his return.<sup>31</sup>

Implicitly, Vico explained why the art of memory as practiced from classical antiquity until the Renaissance worked. In its association of a mnemonic image and an unrelated idea, it borrowed primordial poetic techniques to convey modern prosaic knowledge. Amidst the flux of abstractions of modern discourse, it reached back to the poetic forms of an earlier age to aid in the classification of modern knowledge and to

<sup>27</sup> NS, 331, 338, 846.

<sup>28</sup> NS, 211, 217, 375-77, 381, 447, 520, 692, 849, 855, 878, 896. See also Patrick H. Hutton, "The *New Science* of Giambattista Vico: Historicism in its Relation to Poetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 30 (1972), 362-64.

<sup>29</sup> NS, 220, 429, 444, 518.

<sup>30</sup> On Vico and hermeneutics, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York, 1975), 19-26, 30-31; and Donald R. Kelley, "Vico's Road: From Philology to Jurisprudence and Back," in *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity*, 20.

<sup>31</sup> NS, 122, 604-6, 713, 741.

provide the emotional power needed to evoke that knowledge at will.<sup>32</sup> So wide had the distance between image and idea become for mnemonists who practiced the classical art in the modern age that they had lost touch with the structure of the poetic code. This structure was important because it provided a coherence which the ideas to be remembered did not in themselves symbolically convey. In other words mnemonics as a skill to be acquired was a response to the loss of a linguistic frame of reference. It was the need for such a frame of reference that prompted the search for a mnemonic model that might serve as a practical substitute. By the age of the Renaissance this need had set Neoplatonic mnemonists on a course of seeking to establish the connection between images and ideas in magical ways because they lacked the historical understanding necessary to uncover such connections in the past.

Vico's *New Science* pointed toward a fundamental reorientation of thought about the uses of memory. Henceforth memory would be employed as a technique to uncover forgotten origins understood as lost poetic powers. The quest to touch the original, imaginative powers that make us creative would become the primary quest of the Romantic poets and philosophers of the early nineteenth century. It pointed as well toward the new interest in autobiography, in which the notion of continuous development from infancy to adulthood would provide the sense of unity that could no longer be discovered in the heavens. As metaphysics yielded to psychology, memory as a key to magic was displaced by memory as a key to soul-searching. The distance that the art of memory had travelled in the journey from sixteenth-century rhetoric to nineteenth-century psychology is revealed in the revisioning of the image of memory itself. The image of memory as a brightly-lit theater of the world was replaced by one better attuned to the kind of inquiry with which the art of memory was henceforth to be allied—that of memory as a mirror of the dark abyss of the mind.<sup>33</sup>

As a practitioner of the ancient art of rhetoric, Vico had in the modern age come to appreciate not only the poetic resources but also the evolution of language. In Vichian terms the art of memory drew upon metaphor to further an ironical mode of understanding. The irony was that for all of the originality of his “new science,” the discipline of rhetoric from

<sup>32</sup> Luria's study of the mind of the mnemonist Shereshevskii confirms Vico's explanation of the poetics of memory. When demonstrating his skill before audiences, Shereshevskii developed techniques to speed his commitment of facts to memory. When the facts were extremely difficult, he relied on detailed metaphorical associations. But to recall less complicated data, he intuitively turned to metonymic or synecdochic images. The easier the facts, the further he ascended the tropological gradient of abstraction in his search for images that might be incorporated more rapidly into his memory. Luria, *Mind of a Mnemonist*, 38-61.

<sup>33</sup> Georges Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton, 1980), 32-33, 40.

which he had derived his insights was losing its intellectual status. The age of Enlightenment in whose early days Vico lived marked an intellectual divide between manuscript and print culture. By the end of the eighteenth century the printing press, extant for three centuries, had fundamentally altered the way in which knowledge was transmitted and preserved.<sup>34</sup> The need for an art of memory to verify the integrity of knowledge through recourse to memorized oral formulae was rendered obsolete by the dramatic expansion of the publishing business and the rapid growth of the reading public. Encyclopedias and dictionaries transposed the task of indexing information for ready recall from the mind to the archive.<sup>35</sup> In the process the printed word displaced the oral maxim as the source of learned authority among literate people.<sup>36</sup>

At the same time the advent of print culture, however revolutionary its implications, had been made possible by the long developmental process through which communication was transformed in early modern European culture. The printed word was introduced into a society that had been literate for many centuries. That literacy, in turn, remained highly dependent upon oral tradition. Until printing became the primary mode of human communication during the course of the eighteenth century, oral interpretation continued to provide the basic topical codes for the organization of literate expression. In manuscript culture documents were still composed as if they were to be read aloud.<sup>37</sup> The transformation of the human mind that Vico describes in terms of the evolution of tropes, therefore, may also be understood in terms of the long-range shift from orality to literacy to print culture. Literacy was dependent upon orality in much the same way that reason was dependent upon poetry in Vico's scheme. The oral tradition in which Vico discovered "the true Homer" is the same one to which modern classicists return to explain the origins of literacy. From the Homeric epics (eighth century B.C.) to Greek tragedy (fifth century B.C.), they argue, oral modes of interpretation exercised an immense residual power over literary expression.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 167-208, and *The Business of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 428-34; Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge, England, 1979), I, 3-159; François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Reading and Writing: Literacy in France from Calvin to Jules Ferry* (Cambridge, England, 1982), 5-47.

<sup>35</sup> André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le Geste et la parole* (Paris, 1965), II, 9-34; Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French History* (New York, 1984), 191-213; Walter J. Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* (Ithaca, 1971), 278.

<sup>36</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London, 1982), 124.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-10, 78-116, 119; Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, England, 1977), 112-18.

<sup>38</sup> Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 100-103, 115-28, and *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton, 1982), 143-49.

To this transition the art of memory is an essential guide, for its development was coeval with the rise of literacy. In the days when Homer's epics were first recited, a prodigious memory was still the intuitive talent of bards who stitched together formulaic verses in a different design each time they performed.<sup>39</sup> But by the time that Greek culture entered its classical age three centuries later, mnemonics had become the studied skill of the rhetorician. It is worth noting that the legend of Simonides' invention of the art of memory dates from the early fifth century B.C., precisely the time when literacy was becoming the dominant cultural mode. Moreover, the major theoretical expositions of the art in the ancient world, those devised by Roman rhetoricians in the first century B.C., were contributed during Rome's most illustrious age of literary expression. The revival of the art of memory in the Renaissance of the sixteenth century and its growing refinement over the following one hundred years might be characterized as a Vichian *ricorso* in that this era, too, was one in which a highly literate culture still organized learning according to the canons of oral conceptualization. Mnemonic formulae provided the deep structures for the classification of knowledge until the full impact of the print revolution was felt toward the end of the eighteenth century. Born of intuitive mnemonic powers common in the pre-literate cultures of antiquity, the art of memory as an acquired technique retained its importance as long as oral interpretation influenced the manuscript culture of early modern Europe. Not only was mnemonics a skill derived from oral culture; it was a mode of understanding essential to the organization of literate expression prior to the print revolution.<sup>40</sup> Only when movable alphabetic type had completely replaced oral formulae as the basis for indexing knowledge would mnemonics be perceived to be a marginal skill.<sup>41</sup>

The advent of print culture revolutionized human perception in learning. Print transformed words from sounds to be heard into surfaces to be seen.<sup>42</sup> As places permanently fixed on the printed page, words acquired an autonomy they had not previously possessed. Oral communication is dependent upon living memory, and an argument voiced in conversation must be repeated to be reported anew. But written communication is transacted through texts and thereby acquires a specific identity of time and place. With the coming of print culture, the dissemination of knowledge was thought of less often as the reporting of maxims drawn from a reservoir of timeless common sense, and more often as the recognition

<sup>39</sup> Havelock, *Preface*, 89-121; Ong, *Orality*, 57-68; Berkley Peabody, *The Winged Word* (Albany, 1975), 214-18.

<sup>40</sup> Ong, *Orality*, 26, 33-36, 115-16.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-12, 125.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, 71-74, 100, 117.

of ideas readily identifiable with individual authors writing at specific moments in history.<sup>43</sup>

As for the reader, the print revolution contributed to a change in his self-perception. Reading was a solitary act. As a conversation with an absent author, it encouraged the reader to think more about his own thoughts and feelings. As a mirror for his reflections, the printed page promoted introspection. In this way reading contributed to the discovery of personality, which so preoccupied Romantic writers and readers at the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>44</sup> The psychological reorientation promoted by reading also permitted a new way of understanding the use of memory. The art of memory, previously identified with rote learning for a society whose knowledge depended upon living memory, was re-conceived for one more secure about the permanence of its intellectual acquisitions. Less constrained by demands for assiduous memorization, the citizen of print culture was disposed to use his memory for a more inquisitive kind of learning.<sup>45</sup> If the art of memory appeared to many to have lost favor in the declining prestige of rhetoric, it was destined to rise once more in the guise of autobiography.

Autobiography, understood as a form of meditation (Augustine of Hippo) or as an exposition of personal accomplishment (Benvenuto Cellini), was a genre of long-standing.<sup>46</sup> Only in the late eighteenth century did it become closely identified with a more personal exploration of the psyche.<sup>47</sup> Best known among the practitioners of this new form of soul-searching was the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who thought of his *Confessions* (1770) as a distinctly original literary enterprise.<sup>48</sup> Rousseau's autobiography does display a marked departure from its immediate antecedents. Vico's life chronicle, for example, although written only fifty years before, is a tale of his intellectual formation.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 44, 101-4, 131-32.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-57, 102, 105, 130-31, 153-54; see also the interesting discussion of the way in which Jean-Jacques Rousseau's novel, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, promoted such introspection in Darnton, *Great Cat Massacre*, 215-52.

<sup>45</sup> Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance, 277-79*, and *Orality*, 133-34.

<sup>46</sup> A great deal has recently been written about the role of memory in autobiography. Some of the best articles on the topic are reproduced in the anthology edited by James Olney (cited above in n. 33). Indispensable on conceptions of memory in this context is the sprawling essay by Georges Gusdorf, *Mémoire et personne* (Paris, 1951). The only literary critic to examine the relationship between the classical art of memory and the rhetoric of autobiography, however, is Beaujour, *Miroirs d'encre*, esp. 81-112, who shows how the fields are joined by memory's constructive role in each.

<sup>47</sup> William L. Howarth, "Some Principles of Autobiography," and Michael Sprinker, "The End of Autobiography," in Olney (ed.), *Autobiography*, 113, 325-26.

<sup>48</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, tr. J. M. Cohen (Baltimore, 1953), 17.

<sup>49</sup> *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, tr. Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin (Ithaca, 1963). Only posthumously was Vico's life narrative labeled an autobiography.

Rousseau's, by contrast, is a saga of emotional discovery. Rousseau professed to lay bare his interior life since childhood. His intent was to search out the hidden feelings of the child within his soul. In much the same way that Vico had identified emotional expression with the poetic perceptions of primitive peoples, Rousseau culled his memory for images that had shaped his feelings about himself.<sup>50</sup>

One might contend, however, that Rousseau's *Confessions* display not an art of memory but a memory without artful design. His professed use of memory to recall spontaneously the significant events of his life implied a kind of Vichian recourse to those sources of poetic logic in which memory and metaphor are in transparent correspondence. Critics have since pointed out the degree to which Rousseau's rummaging amidst his memories to discover the sustaining thread of his personal formation was disingenuous. The recollection of the past, they argue, is by nature constructive. One selects images out of the past on the basis of what one deems significant from one's present vantage point, and weaves them tendentiously into a narrative design of the life process.<sup>51</sup> The recollection of the past is therefore a process of emplotting the landmarks of one's life history as it is presently perceived. The search for mnemonic images that mark life's significant turning points (i.e., its commonplaces) is reminiscent of the mnemonist's scheme, even if its structure has been transformed from a spacial into a temporal model.<sup>52</sup> Life's continuity is to be found in this imagined structure of images of one's life journey, not in the objective recovery of the continuous chain of life's events. Rousseau subjectively selected what he believed were the salient events of his life when he composed his *Confessions*, and later in life admitted to confabulations in its narrative in places where his memory failed him.<sup>53</sup>

If Rousseau's *Confessions* do not convey an obvious sense of the mnemonic design of the developing self, the rough shape of such a design was already in the making. By the early nineteenth century the life process was being interpreted in terms of distinct developmental stages. The growing awareness of childhood as a period of life distinct from yet preparatory for adulthood, and of youth as a transitional age of passage between these stages, adumbrated a theory of growth through stages

<sup>50</sup> Jean Starobinski, "The Style of Autobiography," in Olney (ed.), *Autobiography*, 80-82; Samuel S. B. Taylor, "Rousseau's Romanticism," in *Reappraisals of Rousseau*, ed. Simon Harvey et al. (Totowa, N.J., 1980), 16-17; Ann Hartle, *The Modern Self in Rousseau's Confessions* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1983), 115-17.

<sup>51</sup> Stephen Spender, "Confessions and Autobiography," James Olney, "The Ontology of Autobiography," and Louis A. Renza, "A Theory of Autobiography" in Olney (ed.), *Autobiography*, 120-22, 254-55, 288-95; see also Huntington Williams, *Rousseau and Romantic Autobiography* (Oxford, 1983), 218-23.

<sup>52</sup> Gusdorf, *Mémoire et personne*, II, 554; Beaujour, *Miroirs d'encre*, 65-69.

<sup>53</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (Geneva, 1967), 69-73; see also Gusdorf, *Mémoire et personne*, I, 212-15.

along life's way.<sup>54</sup> The notion of the life process as a structured sequence of discrete units demarcated by crises of transition would provide the architectonics for a new art of memory devoted to self-analysis. In the following century, the conception of the life cycle would be further refined into a model of growing complexity, culminating in the eight-stage paradigm designed by Erik Erikson in the mid-twentieth century. It is significant that Erikson presents his model as an easily visualized "epigenetic chart," and that the same chart serves as the centerpiece of no less than four of his books.<sup>55</sup> This schematic diagram may not serve literally as an aid to memory in the classical sense of indexing an imaginary archive for the retrieval of ideas. But it does facilitate the interpretation of the meaning of mnemonic images by providing a clearcut memoryscape on which they may be easily placed.<sup>56</sup> This suggests why Erikson, in his psychobiographies of Martin Luther and Mohandas Gandhi, concentrated upon mnemonic images that signalled significant turning points ("historical moments") in their life histories rather than upon the detailed description that characterizes conventional biography.<sup>57</sup> The meaning of a life is epitomized in what Erikson calls the "moments and sequences" that give structure to one's life history.<sup>58</sup>

The use of memory to further self-understanding, of course, operated within an orbit far wider than autobiography or psychobiography. Nineteenth-century European society was reflective not only about personal recollection but also about collective remembrance. Cults of memory emerged in a myriad of manifestations. Philippe Ariès has pointed out the way in which exaggerated rites of mourning and monumental grave statuary were employed to reinforce the remembrance of departed loved ones. The cemetery was consciously redesigned as a field of memory for kin to visit and wherein they could reminisce.<sup>59</sup> More conspicuous was the way in which rites of commemoration were used to reinforce an emerging vision of cultural nationalism. The nineteenth century witnessed the revival and growing popularity of folk traditions about the mythological founders of nations, of the heroes and heroines of national liberation, of the deeds of revolutionary martyrs, and of soldiers fallen in battle. All of these emblems of the nationalist ideal were given concrete

<sup>54</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, tr. Robert Baldick (New York, 1962), 29-32.

<sup>55</sup> Erik H. Erikson: *Childhood and Society* (2nd ed.; New York, 1963), 273; *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York, 1968), 94; *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York, 1980), 178; *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York, 1982), 32-33, 56-57.

<sup>56</sup> *Identity and the Life Cycle*, 150-58; *The Life Cycle Completed*, 61.

<sup>57</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Life History and the Historical Moment* (New York, 1975), 36-37, 123-24.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-68.

<sup>59</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*, tr. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore, 1974), 72-82, and *The Hour of Our Death*, tr. Helen Weaver (New York, 1981), 474-75, 500-593, 508-13, 518, 524-46.

expression in national shrines, which served as places of pilgrimage and as sites for festivals on days of national remembrance. In effect such shrines were actual memory palaces, constructed of imposing architecture and adorned with aesthetically pleasing icons and artifacts designed to evoke memories of a heroic or glorious past and to imprint them vividly on the minds of visitors.<sup>60</sup> This association of images with places to further the nationalist ideal drew upon classic mnemonic techniques. As in the case of autobiographical reminiscence, the exponents of nationalist ideology believed that if people could recover lost memories of their common origins and heritage, they could make contact with emotions that would enliven their sense of a common identity. Invariably the memories they had in mind came clothed in enchantment.

If mnemonic techniques lay at the source of Romantic soul-searching, both personal and collective, they were only rarely the subject of comment. It was left to Sigmund Freud at the turn of the twentieth century to explain the role of memory in introspection in terms of a mnemonic code. Freud's search for a method with which to recall lost memories of the self is best appreciated in terms of its Romantic antecedents.<sup>61</sup> Like the autobiographers and the apologists for nationalism, Freud identified the search for the self with the recollection of past experiences. But he was suspicious of the enchanted imagery in which childhood memories or, for that matter, conceptions of national origins, were presented. His quest was to dispel that enchantment in order to expose realities hidden beneath. There was something akin to the method of the Renaissance magus in Freud's endeavor. Like Bruno, he was in search of a model that would enable him to uncover a secret universe. Freud was fascinated with the notion of a deep structure of the mind that shaped the workings of the unconscious. His search for a method with which to analyze the psyche was a search for a *clavis universalis*, a master key to this cosmos within.<sup>62</sup> Like Vico, Freud attached enormous importance to the formative influence of origins. What Vico had discovered about the mind in the beginnings of civilization, Freud believed was recapitulated in the present mind (ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny), and he hoped that the probe might proceed deeper into prehistory. Vico had explored new vistas upon

<sup>60</sup> George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses* (New York, 1975), 73-99; Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne au combat: L'imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1789 à 1880* (Paris, 1979); Patrick H. Hutton, *The Cult of the Revolutionary Tradition* (Berkeley, 1981), 119-42; Charles Rearick, *Pleasures of the Belle Epoque* (New Haven, 1985), 3-24.

<sup>61</sup> Lancelot Law Whyte, *The Unconscious Before Freud* (New York, 1960), 167-70, 177-90; Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (New York, 1970), 204-10, 222-23; Arthur K. Berliner, *Psychoanalysis and Society* (Washington, D.C., 1983), 21-25.

<sup>62</sup> On this approach to Freud's work see Carlo Ginzburg, "Clues: Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes," in *The Sign of Three*, ed. Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington, Indiana, 1983), 84-87; Beaujour, *Miroirs d'encre*, 210, 213-16.



memory by virtue of his historical journey into remote regions of human origins. What permitted Freud to move beyond into original terrain was his desire to travel into a realm of which Vico could not have conceived—that of the unconscious mind. For Vico, this would have been a passage across the mythological river Lethe into a realm of oblivion beyond forgetfulness.<sup>63</sup> But what Freud discovered there by making the passage might be characterized as a mnemonics of the unconscious mind.

It was Freud's faith that, barring biological impairment, the unconscious mind retains all of life's memories. The problem of forgetting—of gaps in memory—is due to repression, the relegation of painful or unpleasant memories to the unconscious mind where they are stored intact. The loss of memory, therefore, is not a function of time's erosion, for the unconscious mind has no sense of time. Memory loss is rather a consequence of barriers erected by the unconscious. The analyst's task is to recall these memories from the limbo of repression where they await recollection.<sup>64</sup>

Freud was struck by the fact that childhood, the period of life most formative of our adult personalities, is the one about which we remember the least.<sup>65</sup> The more that we can recollect from this period of our lives, the more likely we are to understand ourselves. But Freud viewed with circumspection those childhood memories that did surface from the unconscious mind, for they were generally benign and sometimes bathed in nostalgia. Whereas the Romantics trusted that there was a direct correspondence between such mnemonic images and the experiences through which they had actually lived, Freud denied that transparency of association. For him such memories were innocuous substitutes for more important ones that remained repressed and hidden from view.<sup>66</sup> If the Romantic project of establishing the connection between past and present identities was to be realized, then the fantasies in which the unconscious psyche clothes its past must be uncovered.<sup>67</sup> The task of Freud's art of memory was to decode these substitute, or screen, memories.

The substitution of an image for an idea, the key to the classical mnemonic code, is also the central proposition of Freud's theory of screen

<sup>63</sup> NS, 346, 717. For the relationship between Vico's and Freud's theories of mind, see Silvano Arieti, "Vico and Modern Psychiatry," *Social Research*, 43 (1976), 739-44, 746-50.

<sup>64</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), tr. James Strachey (New York, 1965), 54.

<sup>65</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories," (1899), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, tr. and ed. James Strachey (London, 1962), III, 303-4, and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), tr. Alan Tyson (New York, 1965), 46.

<sup>66</sup> Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 47-48.

<sup>67</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (1913), tr. James Strachey (New York, 1950), 91-95, and *Interpretation of Dreams*, 530, 539.

memories.<sup>68</sup> Screen memories are mnemonic images that displace deeper, hidden memories. By comparison with the memories they shield, screen memories are of lesser consequence, arouse fewer emotions, and relate to more recent experience. They are projected backward in time to fill the gap created by the repression of the memory of actual experience, and thereby to fulfill the conscious mind's need for a coherent sense of life's development. As in the associations of the mnemonic systems of the Aristotelian tradition, the link between the screen memory and the repressed one is an attachment of place rather than of content. The screen memory fits the pattern of the past envisioned in our present fantasies, yet marks the place where the repressed memory of our actual experience may be retrieved.<sup>69</sup> As Freud explains, screen memories "are not made of gold themselves but have lain beside something that *is* made of gold."<sup>70</sup> Elsewhere he likens the connection to that of the hermit crab with its shell.<sup>71</sup>

But in contrast to the classical art of memory, the purpose of the screen memory is to enable us to forget. Screen memories are defenses employed by the unconscious mind to ward off the recollection of intense, painful, or traumatic experiences, especially those of childhood. Whereas the mnemonist employed vivid images to stimulate his recall of ideas, the unconscious mind uses inconsequential ones to spare the conscious mind the recollection of distressing memories.<sup>72</sup> Freud's theory might be characterized as a reverse mnemonics. Forgetting rather than remembering is what we wish to do because it is easier to live with a screen of fantasies about what our lives have been than with the reality. In his theory of screen memories Freud asserts the constructive power of the unconscious mind to shape recollection. To use his terminology, memory is tendentious in that it reflects unconscious psychic intent.<sup>73</sup> In this respect the unconscious mind is the guardian of memory. It legislates the selection of what is to be remembered and hides the rest away. As an art of memory, therefore, Freud's psychoanalysis is a technique for deciphering the psychic intent encoded in screen memories.

For Freud the analysis of dreams was also a fruitful source for drawing memories from the unconscious mind. Dreams are full of memories that the psyche more willingly gives up as it relaxes its watch during sleep. But the memories of dreams surface in random fragments and so, even if they are successfully interpreted, only provide clues to the code of

<sup>68</sup> Freud, "Screen Memories," 303-22, and *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 43-52. See also Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, tr. Denis Savage (New Haven, 1970), 91, 97 n., 105.

<sup>69</sup> Freud, "Screen Memories," 307, and *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 43-45, 50.

<sup>70</sup> "Screen Memories," 307.

<sup>71</sup> *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 49 n.2.

<sup>72</sup> "Screen Memories," 308-9.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 322; *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 43, 45.

unconscious psychic intent. These memory remnants must still be decoded to discover their connection to forgotten experiences yet to be disclosed.<sup>74</sup> Using the art of memory to interpret mnemonic images, therefore, is far more difficult for the Freudian analyst than it was for the Neoplatonic mnemonist. The mnemonist was able to scan the complete array of images housed in the brightly-lit rooms of his memory palace, whereas the analyst is obliged to scrutinize the haphazard images cast up in shadowy dreams. The mnemonist worked from an index of clearly delineated architectural design, whereas the analyst must decode memory fragments in the hope that they contain pieces of the mosaic of unconscious psychic intent.

Freud's psychobiography of Leonardo da Vinci is his most famous case study of the analysis of a screen memory. It is based upon da Vinci's account of his recollection as an adult of a childhood memory of a vulture placing its tail in his mouth. Freud concluded that it was a fantasy transposed upon his early childhood from adolescence. This screen memory shielded him from the painful memory of his separation from his father during infancy, when he lived alone with his mother. During latency, when he had repressed his love for his mother, he took himself as a model for emulation to fill the void left by his absent father, and so came to love his own childish self. The screen memory of the vulture was a homosexual fantasy of this narcissistic self-love, projected into infancy to displace the painful memory of his lost father. But repressed memories continue to work their power upon the unconscious mind, and da Vinci's repressed memory of his love for his mother was eventually to be transfigured in the creative images that he painted in his adult years, notably that of the beguiling smile of Mona Lisa.<sup>75</sup>

Freud's work on the psychological development of individuals eventually led him to inquire into the psychological development of the species. Herein Freud wrestled with the problem of collective consciousness raised by the nineteenth-century Romantic nationalists. To deal with it, he returned to the approach first suggested by Vico—the analysis of our memories of human origins. Like Vico, he believed that the development of the consciousness of each individual recapitulates the development of the consciousness of all humankind.<sup>76</sup> He reasoned that if the analysis of a screen memory can disclose the lost experiences of childhood, then the analysis of the myths of primitive peoples should enable us to recover lost memories of human origins. But Freud sought to extract from these myths memories of experiences prior to the conscious beginnings of

<sup>74</sup> *Interpretation of Dreams*, 44-55.

<sup>75</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci: A Study in Psychosexuality* (1910), tr. A. A. Brill (New York, 1947), esp. 33-49.

<sup>76</sup> Sigmund Freud: *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), tr. James Strachey (New York, 1961), 86-89; *An Autobiographical Study* (1925), tr. James Strachey (New York, 1952), 138; *Moses and Monotheism* (1937), tr. Katherine Jones (New York, 1967), 90-101, 125-29, 153.

civilization that Vico had identified with the creation of poetic myths. For Freud, these myths were not transparent representations of the age in which they were created, as Vico believed them to be, but screen memories covering earlier events from which humankind wished to shield itself. The memory of civilization's beginnings was reconstructed after an historical period of latency, whereas the actual beginnings remained hidden in repressed memories that we collectively retain in our unconscious minds.<sup>77</sup>

To unblock these memories Freud turned to the analysis of religious myths of origins. Struck by the ongoing power of religion to mold people's minds from antiquity to the present, Freud sought to demythologize religious imagery to uncover the secrets about human origins that he believed they contained. Through his analysis of the myths of totemic religions, the earliest faiths of civilized people, Freud concluded that they screened acts of tribal parricide in which warrior sons murdered the omnipotent tribal father and reluctantly apportioned his power among themselves in a collective covenant. The totem, usually an animal, symbolized the displaced father even as it obliterated him from conscious memory. The totem feast, in turn, was a symbolic act of worshipping while devouring this father whom they had once held in awe yet had been willing to destroy.<sup>78</sup> The father and son imagery of monotheistic religions such as Judaism and Christianity merely reiterated the screening of this primal truth.<sup>79</sup> Religious myth transfigured the primordial conflict of love and aggression into a sacred memory that rendered tolerable a profane truth that remained repressed. The power of religious myth in the present age, Freud concludes, testifies to the power of the repressed memory it screens. Born historically in the first social contract, the religious myth of origins has become timeless as it is unconsciously recapitulated by each generation in the psychological revolt of sons against their fathers.<sup>80</sup>

To conclude we may return to the beginnings of the art of memory in the legend of Simonides, who reconstructed from memory the palace from which he had escaped as it was about to collapse into ruins. Each of the practitioners of the art of memory that we have discussed believed that he could reconstruct such an imaginary palace out of the intellectual ruins of his day because each had faith in his imaginative power to recreate the design of the human world. Each was a builder of paradigms, and each paradigm implied an art of memory. Whether in the guise of Bruno's magic, Vico's poetics, or Freud's psychoanalysis, mnemonics was based

<sup>77</sup> *Totem and Taboo*, 155; *Moses and Monotheism*, 101-2, 164-69.

<sup>78</sup> *Totem and Taboo*, 142-53; *Civilization and its Discontents*, 47-54; *Moses and Monotheism*, 102-8, 152-53.

<sup>79</sup> *Totem and Taboo*, 153-55; *Moses and Monotheism*, 108-14, 174-76.

<sup>80</sup> *Totem and Taboo*, 157; *Civilization and its Discontents*, 79; *Moses and Monotheism*, 157-60, 170.

upon the premise that imagination is born of memory. In the teachings of ancient Greek mythology, Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, is honored as the mother of all of the arts and sciences of human creation. Through her ministry, all knowledge is continually being rebound into new configurations that express the harmony of understanding that humans seek. If Freud's depiction of the human condition is a grim one in comparison with the Romantic ones it challenged, it still provides the consolation of a coherent conception of the human condition. Freud is one of the last exemplars of a tradition of learning based upon the faith that humans have the capacity to recover all human experiences that have been forgotten and thereby to make the record of human history whole.

Since Freud's death that tradition has come under more frequent criticism. Our age possesses considerably less faith in the proposition that the development of civilization, or for that matter the development of the individual psyche, possesses a continuous thread of meaning. In this respect, recent work by cultural historians has tended to place the accent upon the discontinuities between historical epochs, and even among the mentalities of different social groups living beside one another in the same historical era.<sup>81</sup> Michel Foucault's notion of "counter-memory," which denies the ability of collective memory to bind meanings across dissimilar historical epochs, is a provocative statement of this point of view.<sup>82</sup> Foucault's questioning of the intrinsic value of remembering the thought of ages past reveals the degree to which our present perception of the art of memory has shifted from the problem of forgetfulness to that of oblivion. The current popular obsession with maladies of amnesia may well be a legitimate medical worry. But it is also a metaphor for the cultural malaise of our time. As Oliver Sacks, a neurologist with a philosopher's bent, suggests in his recent analysis of the consciousness of a victim of Korsakov's syndrome, amnesia is especially terrifying in our culture because our sense of identity is profoundly tied to specific experiences in our past with which we believe it is crucial to maintain present connections.<sup>83</sup> But the decline of mnemonics itself is perhaps a better example of our forgetfulness of the cultural sense of memory's

<sup>81</sup> Among historians who put the accent upon discontinuity, see esp. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, tr. Siân Reynolds (New York, 1972), I, 20-21; Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, tr. John and Anne Tedeschi (New York, 1982), xi-xxvi. On the challenge to the notion of the integral self in autobiography, see Sprinker, "Fictions of the Self," in Olney (ed.), *Autobiography*, 321-42.

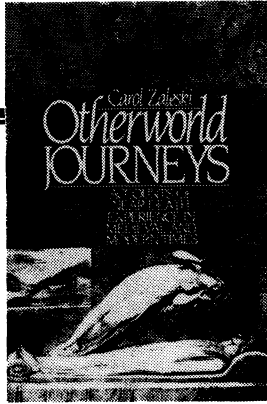
<sup>82</sup> Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, 1977), 139-64.

<sup>83</sup> Oliver Sacks, "The Lost Mariner," *The New York Review of Books* (16 February 1984), 18-19.

meaning. Those psychologists who today dismiss the art of memory as irrelevant to their professional interests may think that they have sound reasons for doing so. But they are missing the historical connection it has always maintained with the human capacity to explain human experience in terms of a vision that unifies knowledge in coherent ways.

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