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Editorial

Memory, Muses, Mimesis

MEMORY INTIMATIONS of intimate ties between memory and narrative go way back, to the ancient Greek myth of Mnemosyne, the mother of nine creative daughters known as the Muses. Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory in Greek mythology was the daughter of Uranus (Heaven) and Gaea (Earth), and, according to Hesiod, the mother (by Zeus) of the nine Muses. She gave birth to the Muses after Zeus went to Pieria and stayed with her nine consecutive nights. The Muses were goddesses of poetic inspiration, the adored deities of song, dance, and memory, on whose mercy the creativity, wisdom and insight of all artists and thinkers depended.

Calliope was the muse of epic poetry. Clio was the muse of history. Erato was the muse of love poetry. Euterpe was the muse of music. Melpomene was the Muse of tragedy. Polyhymnia was the muse of sacred poetry. Terpsichore was the muse of dance. Thalia was the muse of comedy. Urania was the muse of astronomy.

In those days, when written materials were not freely available, memory was very much necessary as a precondition of narrative, and when it is disturbed or malfunctioning, narratological coherence and efficiency suffer as well. In fact, narration not only depends on memory. It is inherently constructed by it as well, as seen in the

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ubiquity of memory-based techniques like retroversion – also known as a flashback – in any narrative or story.

However, the memory-narrative relation is far from unidirectional: just as memory engenders narrative, so is narrative, at times, indispensable for the agility of the faculty of memory. The classical art of memory, or “architectural mnemonics”, is a case in point, as it is based on the use of narrative structures for the improvement of the ability to memorise, particularly for the use of orators.

In its original version, created in antiquity and thriving all through the Middle Ages and up to the sixteenth century, the art of memory consisted of the creation of an imaginary place, say a house. Within the house, several more specific locations were defined, and the items to be memorised, incarnated in visual images, were then allocated to these locations. To retrieve those items, one had to imagine a tour of the house, visiting each place in turn, finding in it just the right image placed there, so to speak, in advance. Thus, the time-based narrative was superimposed on a spatial ordering to ensure the fulfilment of Mnemosine’s task.

The art of memory, thus described, rests on two principles, often naturalised and overlooked in spite of their fundamental importance and their dependence on cultural norms. The first is the perfect, transparent translatability of verbal concepts into visual images. To be sure, as Mary Carruthers explains in her *Book of Memory*, this does not necessarily mean that there is a resemblance between what has to be memorised and its mental image, but the unambiguous relation of signification between the two is nonetheless taken for granted, as is the need of the image and its location to be clear and perfectly visible (Sapir. 2006).

The second principle is the absolute necessity of a “place” in order for something to happen. In this case, a place is indispensable for the images to function according to the role allotted to them in the “art of memory” system. It is quite remarkable that many European languages have retained this

“locational prejudice” in their vocabulary: English, for instance, uses “to take place” as an equivalent to “to happen”, whereas French prefers the less active “*avoir lieu*”, to have a place, to denote the same meaning (Sapir. 2006). Things that happen should occupy a place – a single, clear locus or site, on which, like a theatre stage, the narrative can run its course.

Both these principles – translatability and localisation – are also an inherent part of the theoretical framework accompanying one of the mightiest artistic movements in the history of western culture – Italian, more specifically Florentine, Renaissance painting. This self-proclaimed apotheosis of European art was solidly grounded on the iconographical rendering of verbal concepts and on the creation of perspective-guided places where the resulting depiction was to take place. Or so, at least, claims the Renaissance painting manual cum theory, Alberti’s *On Painting* (Alberti & Sinisgalli, 2913). . Not surprisingly, this opus also makes the somewhat dubious statement that the starting point for any painting should be a *historia*, a story or a narrative – although, as the new French edition of *On Painting* (Alberti & Sinisgalli, 2013) reminds us, this fundamental notion cannot be simply translated into its modern derivatives (Sapir, 2006).

Mimesis, (*mīmēsis* μίμησις) provides basic theoretical principle in the creation of art. The word means “imitation” (though in the sense of “re-presentation” rather than of “copying”). Plato and Aristotle spoke of *mimesis* as the re-presentation of nature. When the Greeks of the classical period wanted to characterize the basic nature of painting and sculpture, poetry and music, dance and theatre, i.e. things we today call works of art, most of them agreed that such things were *mimemata* (in singular form *mimema*), the result of an activity they named *mimesis*.

The theory of *mimesis* is now generally regarded as the oldest theory of art. But the theory of *mimesis* as we find it in ancient texts is not a theory of art in a modern sense; it is rather a theory of pictorial apprehension and representation. The basic distinction for the ancient theory of *mimesis* was that between *mimemata* and real things. For example, a house is a real thing whereas a painting or a sculpture representing a house is a *mimema*, a thing that looks like a house but is not a house.

Both Plato and Aristotle saw in mimesis the representation of nature, including human nature, as reflected in the dramas of the period. Aristotle also defined mimesis as the perfection, and imitation of nature. Art is not only imitation but also the use of mathematical ideas and symmetry in the search for the perfect, the timeless, and contrasting being with becoming. Nature is full of change, decay, and cycles, but art can also search for what is everlasting and the first causes of natural phenomena.

Through memory, when the artist imitates the world and represents it through mimesis, not only the object of art but also human meaning surfaces. If we can draw meaning from art, the re-presentation of the world, we can draw more meaning out of the world, including human beings themselves. Art facilitates this process. Memory is essential for it. Mimesis is the process of discerning this meaning. Then we shall be open to the muses in our own lives.

Some of the articles in this issue deal with these themes of memory, Muses, mimesis and meaning. May our memories and history enable us to imitate our great heroes and make meaning as a community of human beings.

The Editor

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