

Della Porta, Giovan Battista. *The Art of Remembering: L'arte del ricordare*. Ed. Armando Maggi and Frederick A. de Armas. Trans. Miriam Aloisio et al. Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2012. 168 pages. €20.00. ISBN 978-8880637479

Memory isn't what it used to be. In schools, memorization has become a neglected art, associated with rote learning of meaningless dates and facts. Why waste mental energy memorizing things when they can be accessed with the touch of a screen or the click of a mouse? In common usage, "memory" is now a term more associated with technological capacity than with human recollection. It is easy to blame digital technology for the low esteem that memorization holds in our culture, but the root cause is not so much the Internet as the basic technology of writing. As far back as Plato's *Phaedrus* (275a), writing has been seen as the enemy of memory. Once you make a written record, whether on a clay tablet or an iPad, you are outsourcing your memory.

In the sixteenth century, the art of memory was definitely seen as something worth cultivating. And rather than rejecting writing as the antithesis of memory, early modern theorists were eager to use the resources of print technology to strengthen natural mnemonic ability. One of the most influential texts on memory in early modern Europe was Giovan Battista Della Porta's brief treatise *L'arte del ricordare* [*The Art of Memory*]. Della Porta (1535-1615) was a Neapolitan scholar who wrote extensively on magic and physiognomy as well as memory. He was also a prolific playwright. *L'arte del ricordare* was first published in Naples in 1566 in an Italian edition ostensibly translated by Dorandino Falcone da Gioia from Della Porta's unpublished Latin original, though it is possible that Della Porta was himself responsible for the Italian text. In any case, in 1602 Della Porta published an expanded edition in Latin, entitled *Ars reminiscendi*.

Never before translated into English, Della Porta's treatise is now available in an excellent dual language edition produced by a team of scholars from the University of Chicago. The volume includes the full 1566 Italian text of *L'arte del ricordare*; an English translation by Miriam Aloisio, Gregory Baum, Elizabeth Fiedler, Maggie Fritz-Morkin, and Michael Subialka; a lengthy introduction to Della Porta's writings on memory by Armando Maggi; a substantial essay on Della Porta's influence on literature and thought in English, French, and Spanish by Frederick A. de Armas; a piece by Gregory Baum on the relation of Della Porta's treatise to other

sixteenth century writing on memory; and a short biographical note on Della Porta by Miriam Aloisio. The volume also reproduces a series of relevant illustrations from Della Porta's texts on memory, botany, and physiognomy.

Della Porta's text provides a fascinating account of early modern ideas about memory and its significance, as well as outlining an elaborate method for strengthening one's powers of recall. He begins by distinguishing between innate natural memory and artificial memory that is achieved through a structured discipline of mental exercise. Such discipline is necessary if knowledge is to be retained and not lost to the natural process of aging. Although at times Della Porta describes marvellous feats of memory as if they were freaks of nature ("Portius Latro . . . could recite two thousand names forwards and backwards, and two hundred Latin verses after they were read to him" [90]), it is clear that Della Porta sees memory as a fundamental defence against mortality and mutability. Knowledge and experience have no utility or even existence unless they can be reliably accessed through memory.

The memory technique that Della Porta outlines begins with the imagination of a particular place, usually a house or other building (91-94). Within this imagined house, the memorizer should imagine particular rooms in a definite sequence, each filled with particular items of furniture and inhabited by imagined people. All of these items—rooms, furnishings, people—can then be used as prompts to remember particular pieces of information (98). Memory is thus understood as a series of associations, a symbolic system of signifiers each standing in for a particular signified. Memory is also primarily visual; a vivid mental image stands in for a word or a concept. Vividness is key; abstract words and ideas are hard to hold in memory, and so to preserve them more strongly they need to be coupled with striking visuals. Della Porta famously contends that the paintings of masters like Michelangelo and Titian will stay firmly in the mind when more conventional images are forgotten (103). Besides being visual and associational, memory is also understood to be topographical: for Della Porta memory is a landscape, rather than a list or a filing system. In Della Porta's treatise memory is both linear (following a set arrangement of images and their associations), and non-linear (a space to explore rather than a sequence to follow). After describing the most effective ways to construct this mental landscape, Della Porta discusses various ways that

memory can be used to associate one word with another: by addition, subtraction, transposition, mutation, and alteration of letters or syllables. His treatise also includes a brief discussion of hieroglyphics and how they may be used to aid memory (114), as well as a wonderful chapter on ways to forget information that is no longer needed (99-100).

Della Porta's treatise is an important text for anyone interested in the history of memory and mnemonic technique, as well as for scholars investigating the theoretical relation of images to words, or words to concepts. The volume's editorial apparatus makes frequent reference to Della Porta's revised and expanded Latin version of his treatise, and it would have perhaps been ideal for this edition to have included a transcription and translation of that text as well. But this would have been beyond the scope of the volume as it stands. And the volume is exemplary. The editors and translators are to be commended for making such an intriguing and useful text available to an English language readership.

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