

II. Mortal and Immortal Forgetting

1. THE ART OF REMEMBERING — THE ART OF FORGETTING (SIMONIDES, THEMISTOCLES)

We move now to Greece. The time is around 500 B.C.E. A celebration is being held. This celebration provides the framework for the fundamental myth of the art of memory (*ars memoriae*).

A boxer by the name of Skopas has won a victory and asks the poet Simonides of Keos (ca. 557–ca. 467 B.C.E.) to compose a song of praise (*epikinion*) to commemorate this athletic achievement and to present the song at the victory celebration. Everything goes as planned, and the poet ceremoniously praises the athlete.

It is not just any poet whom Skopas has sought out to sing his fame. Plato said that Simonides was a “wise and godly man,” and Lessing, who has a clear idea of him and attributes the Greek enlightenment to him, calls him the “Greek Voltaire.” Simonides is known above all for his aesthetic view expressed in the adage “Painting is silent poetry; poetry is speaking painting.” Of his poetic work we cannot, however, form an adequate impression, since it is not extant.¹

Not even the song in praise of Skopas remains. We know about it only through an anecdote related by Cicero and Quintilian in their works on rhetoric and repeated by various later authors. The story was also handed down, with diverging variants, in the form of a fable (Phaedrus, La Fontaine).² According to all these anecdotal and fabulous sources, Skopas was not pleased with the work Simonides delivered because the poet devoted two thirds of his poem to the youthful, athletic twin divinities, the Dioscuri Castor and Pollux, and only one third to Skopas himself. Hence he maintained that Simonides was entitled to only one third of the promised honorarium and suggested that he ask the gods to pay the other two thirds.

There is, however, more to the story. During the banquet at the end of the celebration, to which the boxer has also invited his poet, the doorkeeper unexpectedly asks Simonides to come outside the hall. Two young men have come, he says, who want to speak to him right away. Simonides leaves the room but finds no one waiting for him outside. At that moment the ceiling of the room collapses and buries the host along with all his guests under the rubble. Only Simonides, called outside in the nick of time, escapes death. In this way the gods—Castor and Pollux in person—

fulfill their obligation to thank the poet while Skopas, who tried to forget his duty to express his gratitude for his poem, is punished.

So where is the art of memory in all this? The rhetoricians Cicero and Quintilian know still another continuation of the story (which no longer interests the fabulists). When, after the terrible accident, the relatives try to identify their dead, they find the bodies so mangled and mutilated that they cannot recognize them. Simonides, however, can help. As a poet he has a fine pictorial memory and remembers exactly which place at the table was occupied by each individual guest. This spatial memory allows him to identify the victims by their location in the room.

Ever since this mnemonic performance the poet Simonides has been considered the inventor of the technique of memory or "mnemotechnics," and this is regarded as an art that can serve to overcome forgetting.³ It may even be that this implicitly refers to the forgetting of the dead if Stefan Goldmann is correct in arguing that the Simonides anecdote and its variants document the derivation of the art of memory from the Greco-Roman cult of the dead.⁴ At the beginning of Simonides' mnemonic effort stands, in fact, a menacing catastrophe of forgetting: the sudden death that makes remembering a problem. However that may be, in Cicero and Quintilian, Simonides' astonishing mnemonic performance has become an "art" (Greek *technē*, Latin *ars*). The word must be understood here in its pre-modern sense: as a body of knowledge of a certain complexity that can be expressed in rules and thus taught, though learning it requires considerable effort and patience for "art is long, life short" (*ars longa, vita brevis*). Hence all the romantic and postromantic associations with spontaneity, creativity, and genius must be erased. Nor can we even see this as a science. What were later called the "free" or liberal arts (*artes liberales*), which included along with rhetoric the art of memory, are propaedeutic, preceding the sciences, and well into modern times they belong to a general educational stock that has not yet been differentiated into separate disciplines.

In the ancient and medieval art of memory—and this is already recognizable as the chief point of the Simonides anecdote—memory is fundamentally spatialized.⁵ In its very substance, then, it is a spatial art (a "topic"). The memory artist who follows Simonides' example first seeks for his purpose a set arrangement of "places" (Greek *topoi*, Latin *loci*) with which he is familiar, such as his house or the forum. Then he transforms the individual memory contents into "images" (Greek *phantasmata*, Latin *imagines*)—if they are not already images—and associates them with these places in sequential order. He does this by making use of his "imagination" (Greek *phantasia*, Latin *imaginatio*). When he makes his speech the memory artist has thus only to stroll mentally (*permeare, pervagari, percurrere*)

through the places in order to call up the memory images in sequence. Hence this art is always practiced in a memory-scape in which everything that must be remembered has its own specific place. Only forgetting has no place there.



Or is forgetting perhaps nearer at hand than it at first appears? That is a question that gave rise to another famous ancient anecdote. It is closely associated with the Simonides anecdote because of the persons involved. One of the poet Simonides' contemporaries in Athens, and much better known than he, was the politician and military leader Themistocles (ca. 524-459 B.C.E.). He made Athens an important seaport and, after the victory over the Persians in the naval battle at Salamis (480), the greatest sea power in the western Mediterranean. Despite these brilliant military exploits, in his old age he was ostracized and banished from the city. He lived as a refugee in Persian territory, where he finally committed suicide.

Themistocles was, as we learn from Plutarch and other sources, a man of great intellectual gifts with an outstanding mastery of the art of oratory. In the sources there is, however, much that is unfavorable with regard to his character. Among the victims of his penchant for mockery was the poet Simonides.

These two Athenians are bound together in an anecdote that Cicero recounts at various points in his writings on eloquence.⁶ One day Simonides is supposed to have come to Themistocles and offered to teach him the art of memory so that with its help he "might be able to remember everything" (*ut omnia meminisset*). Themistocles replied that he did not need any art of memory. Rather than learning how to remember everything, he would prefer to learn how to forget everything he wants to forget (*gratius sibi illud esse facturum si se oblivisci quae vellet, quam si meminisse docuisset*). According to another version of the anecdote Themistocles curtly replied that he was not interested in an art of memory (*ars memoriae*) but rather was interested in an art of forgetting (*ars oblivionis*).

Why does Themistocles want to learn the art of forgetting? Cicero answers: "because everything he had ever seen or heard stuck in his memory" or, in a concluding commentary on the same anecdote, "because nothing that flowed into this man's mind ever flowed out again." That is in accord with Plutarch's biographical observation certifying that this Athenian politician knew the name of every single Athenian citizen.⁷ And later on, even as an old man in exile, in just one year he is supposed to have learned the Persian language so well that he was able to converse with the king without an interpreter. Apparently the Themistocles of Cicero's anecdote was

able to scorn Simonides' art of memory and value its opposite, the art of forgetting, only because he possessed an excellent "natural memory" (*memoria naturalis*) that retained too much rather than too little.

Thus, at first in the form of an anecdote, was born the idea of an art of forgetting (*ars oblivionis*, *ars oblivionalis*) that was never again to disappear from the world. We shall encounter it again under various other names, such as "amnestonics" (from *amnesia*, forgetting), "lethognomics" or "lethotechnics" (both derived from Lethe, the mythical river of forgetting).

Moreover, Cicero can also tell us what the Athenian military man found most troubling in remembering and forgetting. Cicero reports Themistocles' words verbatim: "What I don't want to remember, I remember; yet what I want to forget, I cannot forget" (*Nam meminisse etiam quae nolo, oblivisci non possum quae volo*).

Bearing the stamp of Cicero's authority, the Themistocles anecdote, along with the idea of a desirable or at least conceivable art of forgetting, makes its way through the world and reaches, after two and a half millennia and via many way stations, Umberto Eco. One day Eco is having a few glasses of wine with some friends and they think up a parlor game the point of which is to imagine disciplines that not only do not exist—overcoming this obstacle would already be part of the intellectual challenge—but also cannot exist because they are impossible, for historical or logical-epistemological reasons. Among these the art of forgetting, which he calls *ars oblivionalis*, occurs to him. Immediately he writes a conference paper (1966)—thoroughly serious, moreover—in which, using a strict semiotic method, that is, one based on the theory of signs, he seeks to prove that there can be no art of forgetting as the counterpart of the art of memory because all signs produce presences, not absences. Eco is willing at most to assign this art of forgetting a small place on the margin of semiotics, suggesting that an inordinately industrious mnemotechnics, by an exceptional success in "multiplying presences," can eventually produce a critical befuddlement of memory that in turn has forgetfulness as its consequence. This would be an art of forgetting connected with the art of remembering only as a sort of overload relief valve. Eco's reflections can still be read as a scholarly article; it appeared in English under the title "An *Ars Oblivionalis*? Forget It."⁸ But my curiosity was aroused by Eco's suggestion that we should forget the *ars oblivionalis* almost as soon as he had so cleverly drawn attention to it, and I would like to ask my reader to be on the watch for clues that indicate that this art of forgetting, even though it should not exist, according to Eco's argument, exists nonetheless and is encountered wherever we go, from Homer up to our own day.

2. ODYSSEUS TELLS ABOUT FORGETTING

(HOMER)

In the seventh book of the *Odyssey*, Homer tells how Odysseus, on his difficult way home from Troy, is shipwrecked on the Phaiakian island of Scheria. Miserable and exhausted, he is found on the beach by the princess Nausikaa and her friends and is taken to the palace of her father, King Alkinoos. There the shipwrecked man is received with the greatest hospitality a stranger could hope for in the Homeric world. Odysseus remains three days with the Phaiakians, and then, laden with precious gifts, he is given a ship, which has been freshly outfitted by his host, and sails off toward his home in Ithaca.

Before Odysseus leaves the hospitable island of the Phaiakians, however, he agrees during the farewell dinner given in his honor to grant his hosts' request that he tell his story. He begins: "I am Odysseus, son of Laërtes." The subsequent narrative fills four books of the *Odyssey* (9–12) and summarizes the situation that for ten years has prevented the hero from returning home. Odysseus has had to contend with rocky cliffs and storms at sea, and hostile powers have sought to take his life—among them not only Polyphemos but also the powerful sea god Poseidon, who caused his shipwreck on the Phaiakian shore. The greatest and most perilous obstacles to his return home to Ithaca, however, have arisen from the manifold temptations of forgetting that he has been exposed to during his long wandering. He tells the Phaiakians about these temptations in three episodes of his narrative: the ones about the Lotus-eaters, Circe, and Calypso.¹

Odysseus talks about the Lotus-eaters at the beginning of the story he tells in the ninth book. In doing so he reaches far back in time to a point at which things still look promising for him and his fleet includes twelve ships. He anchors the ship off an unknown coast—was it perhaps the island Meninx, today Djerba?—and sends a few of his men ashore to find out about the island. They do not return. Did they run into unfriendly inhabitants, who took them prisoner or even killed them? That is not what happened. The inhabitants of the island received them in a friendly manner and treated them as their guests. They were offered a delicious fruit that tasted like honey, known as lotus, which was regularly eaten by the islanders, who were accordingly called "Lotophagoi" ("Lotus-eaters"). In addition to its wonderful taste this fruit has the property of causing forgetfulness. And so Odysseus's scouts, after eating of the lotus, not only completely forget the goal of their voyage—the homecoming in Ithaca—but also forget the assignment Odysseus gave them, and they entirely give themselves up to the pleasure of eating the delicious fruit and the delight of residing among the friendly Lotus-eaters.

Concerned about his scouts, Odysseus sends another party in search of

them. They are found in a blissful ecstasy of oblivion and are brought "weeping" and against their will back to the ship. To prevent them from returning to the dangerous pleasures of the Lotus-eaters they are chained to their rowing-benches. Odysseus strictly forbids them and the other sailors in his fleet to partake of this drug. He hastily weighs anchor and continues his voyage.

Philologists and pharmacologists have labored mightily to discover precisely what plant this drug of oblivion might be. It is probably a certain kind of lotus-flower that had an important meaning in the Egyptian cult of the dead and was eaten as a ceremonial meal. But we can no longer clearly determine whether its role had to do with memorializing the dead or with forgetting them, and we know nothing more about the subject than what Odysseus tells us. In particular, the verses of Homer's epic do not tell us whether the forgetfulness produced by this drug is lasting or only temporary. All we know for sure is that the lotus-fruit does not merely taste sweet but also provides "sweet forgetfulness," so that those who eat of it desire only to go on living in the comfort of this beautiful present.²

Nietzsche

The second episode in which Odysseus tells about forgetting occurs in the tenth book of the *Odyssey* and deals with the beautiful but treacherous goddess Circe (Kirke). Once again Odysseus and his companions land on an unknown coast, and once again scouts are dispatched. In the course of their exploration they come to Circe's palace; it is soon clear that she has a great many evil powers at her command. Odysseus's scouts immediately experience the effects of these powers on their own bodies, for they are transformed into swine by Circe's magic wand and shut up in a pigsty, although they do not lose their human consciousness as a result. But before bringing about this metamorphosis Circe had already given the unsuspecting scouts another magic potion, which once again proves to be a drug of forgetfulness since, like the lotus-fruit, it erases all memory of their homeland. The pharmacological recipe for this drug is described in detail in Homer's verses; it is a carefully dosed mixture of wine, cheese, flour, and golden honey. Circe's "fatal drug" (Greek *pharmakon lygron*) has the effect of making the visitors who innocently eat it "lose all memory of their homeland"—which in this case may have made their swinish fate somewhat easier to bear.

Now how does the story continue? Odysseus sets out to find his lost companions. Hermes, the gods' messenger, warns him about this treacherous host's magical powers and equips him with an antidote. With his strength and help Odysseus succeeds in rendering Circe's magical powers ineffective and moreover in persuading her to transform back into men the sailors who have been changed into swine.

However, Odysseus soon falls victim himself to another forgetfulness spell, against which he has no antidote. He allows himself to be bewitched

by Circe, and in her arms he delivers himself up to the spell of love. Odysseus remains with Circe a full year and forgets, so long as the drug of forgetfulness produces its effect, his return home to Penelope. His comrades finally have to urge him to voyage further, and with a heavy heart he leaves his beloved.

The third episode about forgetfulness narrated by Odysseus deals with the arts and wiles of the nymph Calypso. In her case, as in that of Circe, love is the most powerful drug of oblivion. Its effects last seven years. That is a long time, and Odysseus's thirst for action eventually overcomes his love for the nymph, although between them there is an important difference in status—he is mortal, but as a goddess she is immortal. So Calypso plays her last trump card. She offers to make Odysseus immortal if he will love her, and then amid divine nectar and ambrosia he will forget all earthly things forever—including, of course, his wife, Penelope.

But Zeus has other plans in mind. He has Hermes inform Calypso that she must let Odysseus depart immediately. On a raft Odysseus leaves her island. Angered by Zeus's infringement on his equally divine rights, Poseidon dashes the raft to smithereens. Thus Odysseus reaches the Phaiakians as a shipwrecked man. And he straightaway tells them about this perilous temptation to forget.³



Homer is the first but not the only Greek poet who makes an honored place in literature for forgetting as well as for remembering, as Michèle Simondon in particular has persuasively demonstrated.⁴ Hesiod plays a key role here. In his *Theogony* the memory goddess Mnemosyne (Latin *Memoria*), who is associated with the light of day and with the sun god Apollo, is for the first time accompanied by the dark goddess of forgetfulness, Lethe, who is associated with night. Both goddesses have their rights and their own domains, and mortals can offer sacrificial victims to them whether they are hoping for powerful aid from memory or from forgetting. Salvation and healing are sought in forgetting above all when a mortal is threatened by pain and suffering. Forgetting one's misfortune is already half of happiness. This is known in poetry and particularly among the tragedians (especially Euripides) and the love poets (especially Alkaios).

In this process drugs (*pharmaka*) are once again helpful. In them we can see anew the ambivalence of the strength of the human soul with regard to remembering and forgetting. The Greeks had drugs for both. On the side of remembrance, it has been said that Simonides, who invented the art of memory, took memory-enhancing drugs.⁵ On the side of forgetting, there is, in addition to the drugs already known from Homer, the plant nepenthe, which came from Egypt and was mixed with wine. It was said to

have the power, by inducing forgetting, to alleviate pain and suffering, wrath and rage, and all other such afflictions. The fair Helen resorts to this drug of forgetfulness when she learns what suffering her beauty has caused the Greeks and Trojans.

In addition to all these sources of forgetfulness and consolation, ever since the ancient Greeks there has been another drug that has never ceased to play an important role in the art of forgetting. I refer to wine, which "drives cares away" (Euripides). Wine is a cherished gift of the gods for which we are indebted to Dionysos (Latin Bacchus), whose frenzied worship quickly spread throughout post-Homeric Greece and the whole Mediterranean world. Because wine makes us forget our troubles more effectively than does any other drug, Alkaios, the poet of Lesbos, calls it "the best drug" (*pharmakon ariston*).⁶

More-recent poets feel much the same way. From an overwhelming multitude of witnesses let us select here only Schiller, who like Goethe knew how to appreciate a good wine and spent many high-spirited hours drinking with his friend from Weimar. I shall cite a few verses from Schiller's poem "The Victory Celebration" ("Das Siegesfest"), which is situated in the mythological context of the Trojan war. Nestor, one of the Greek victors, hands a goblet of wine to the prisoner of war Hecuba, the Trojan king Priam's wife, and says to her:

*Trink ihn aus, den Trank der Labe,
Und vergiß den großen Schmerz!
Wundervoll ist Bacchus' Gabe,
Balsam fürs zerriss'ne Herz.*

Drink this up, a festive potion,
And forget your great travail!
Wonderful is Bacchus's gift,
Balm for the broken heart.⁷

It is a wise man who speaks this way. The Greeks willingly took his advice.

3. FORGETFUL LOVE

(OVID)

In love much is forgotten. In ancient Rome this was well known to boys and girls; when love's forgetting was involved they therefore went to the Colonic gate, where near the temple of Venus there was said to be a shrine to Amor Lethaeus (Lethean Love)—so called after Lethe, the mythical stream of oblivion. This divinity did not promise to work against forgetting, how-

wine
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ever; in the fiction of the poet Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso, 43 B.C.E.–ca. 17 C.E.) its role was to ensure thorough forgetting when an unworthy beloved or a villainous lover no longer deserved to be loved. Then young people hurried to the statue of Amor Lethaeus to make their prayers and vows and “beg for forgetfulness” (*oblivia poscere*).¹

How precisely does this Roman god help? How does he extinguish—since Amor Lethaeus is a river god—the troublesome embers of passionate love? This is a difficult task even for a god, and it takes time to achieve the longed-for goal: “the end of love” (*finis amoris*). Even Amor Lethaeus does not have a miraculous cure to offer. Rather he helps in a human way, namely through the art of forgetting, which can be learned. So far as love is concerned, Ovid shows himself to be a master of this art, and by means of his “Art of Love” (*Ars amatoria*) he won a name for himself in Latin literature. In his verses one and the same poet thus teaches both the art of loving (*amare*) and the art of forgetting this love (*dediscere amare*) when necessary. This reminds us of the (Greek) philosopher in Rome who, as a much admired virtuoso in forensic rhetoric, spoke in favor of something one day and spoke against it the next day (cf. below, chap. 5, sec. 3).

So far as the art of forgetting in love is involved, Ovid declares himself its advocate in his humorous-didactic poem *Remedy for Love* (*Remedia amoris*), which deals, as its title indicates, with an art of healing. The poet Ovid is here the physician—a physician who himself often suffers from the illness that he claims to be able to heal (*medicus aeger*). No matter; the author still knows this art and can name the remedy by means of which the person who needs to forget can—he hopes—bridge the gulf between wanting to forget and being able to forget. Moreover he offers his therapeutic recommendations to both male and female patients alike; he provides, as he puts it in an image, weapons for both the warring parties. But being himself male, for his presentation he nevertheless chooses the perspective of a man in love who wants to forget his faithless beloved.

What kinds of remedies are prescribed for this illness? In Ovid it is not a matter of medicinal *pharmaka*; he seems to spurn the drugs of forgetting, though from his reading of Homer he must have known at least the lotus-flower. Wine is just briefly mentioned, and Ovid says that drunk in moderation it increases love but that drunk to excess it dulls love along with the other senses. With this exception all the remedies Ovid recommends are—to put it in modern terms—psychotherapeutic in nature.

What is so clever about this erotic (or antierotic) art of forgetting is first of all that, using apparently paradoxical but actually highly ingenious methods, the competent physician puts the art of memory in the service of the art of forgetting. As a patient the lover is supposed to mobilize all his powers of memory to set before his eyes, as vividly as possible and in accord with all the rules of the art, just how *odious* his beloved in reality was.

Step 1
Form
Image

Did she have a well-rounded figure? She was fat. Was she slender? She was skinny. Likewise she was not a brunette but rather her hair was pitch-black. And then her character! Does he no longer remember how greedy, miserly, temperamental, mendacious, hard-hearted, and, of course, faithless she was? The first step in learning this art of forgetting love consists in recalling as clearly as one can all the beloved's defects (*omnia damna*) and how much pain love has caused him. One must constantly keep the goal in view: to make the sweetness of the earlier love grow sour (*inascescere*) in one's memory. And the patient must absolutely persist in all these efforts until the goal is achieved (*perfer!*).

Step 3, 4?
Throw
stuff
away

In still greater detail than these positive achievements Love then sets forth the negative efforts that are, according to his doctrine, conducive to forgetting. Thus there follow strategies of forgetting in the proper sense of the word that work directly on the mind. The first thing to do is to get all the images of the beloved out of the house. Here Ovid expressly refers to "waxen images" (*cerae*), which immediately reminds us that according to the previously mentioned Platonic and Aristotelian metaphor the memory is like a wax tablet, on which the images and signs that are to be remembered are impressed. In addition letters from the beloved, which the lover has probably kept, must under no circumstances be reread: "Into the fire with them!" (*omnia in ignes!*). As for the rest, the lover must strictly avoid all places with which memories of the beloved are connected—first of all, naturally, the bedroom and the bed, which could quickly make the embers flare up again—and also everywhere else that the beloved liked to frequent and where one might even—and this would be disastrous for the therapy!—meet her again.

To get away from all these potential obstacles to effectively forgetting the beloved, travel is particularly recommended. The lover should travel as long (*lentus abesto*) and as far (*via longa*) as possible if he wants to forget love. It is best to go to the country, where he will easily think of other things, but he should take a friend along so that he does not end up brooding over his love. Besides, companionship and lively conversations are among the most important remedies for love. On the other hand, music, dancing, and theater are to be avoided; they are too close to love and might quickly revive the old passion. Caution in general is recommended since "the slightest spark can ignite a bonfire" (*e minimo maximus ignis*).

In his healing phase may the practitioner of the art of forgetting read respected Greek and Roman poets such as Callimachus, Sappho, Anacreon, Tibullus, and Propertius? Here, too, great care is advised because reading such poets is also a highly dangerous activity. One can say of all of them what Ovid said of the lyric poet Callimachus: "He is no enemy to love" (*non est inimicus amori*). In fact, Ovid considers his own love poems, which

X Ovid source for wikiHow article

sound "somewhat similar," to belong to the same kind of poetry, and he counsels a person who wants to forget love not to read Ovid either.

What else can distract the lover? Of course, since idleness always goes hand in hand with love there is always one's work (*opus*), profession (*fora, leges*), or business (*res*) and service to the state in peace (*toga urbana*) or war (*munera Martis*). All these activities help one gradually to forget love. It might be a long process, but that is not a problem since only he who forgets slowly (*lente desinere*) forgets enduringly. And let no one following this path groan and deceive himself with the complaint "I am no longer in love." Anyone who talks this way is still far from having forgotten his love.

Finally, to put an end to all wavering and hesitation the most extreme and effective *remedium amoris* must be invoked, and it is almost always successful. This is: a new love, a new passion (*novus amor, novae flammae*). Thereby the lover quickly faces a crucial decision and must make up his mind: Is the old beloved or the new one more important? If the new beloved wins out, then all problems are resolved since "every love is overcome by its successor" (*successore novo vincitur omnis amor*). With this extreme remedy Ovid's art of forgetting finally (oh, really?) reaches its goal.

4. TRANSCENDENTAL FORGETTING AND EARTHLY RECOLLECTION (PLATO, AUGUSTINE)

In Plato's dialogue *Meno*, Socrates, in whom Plato's spokesman can be recognized, uses an experiment to show Meno his pedagogical method (the "Socratic method"). It relies on teaching by questioning. Socrates demonstrates this method by the way he uses a series of questions to lead a young slave boy with no conception of mathematics to discover by himself the elementary laws of geometry. It is true that the boy makes some errors, which have to be corrected by means of supplementary questions, but at the end of the question-and-answer game the "subject" (as we would now say) has achieved the pedagogical goal set for him and now knows that if one doubles the length of one side of a rectangle its area increases not twofold (as he at first thought) but fourfold.¹

Where did the boy get this knowledge if it had not already been given him as material to be learned? Plato's answer reaches far beyond the realm of pedagogy into the very heart of his metaphysics. He is convinced that this knowledge proceeds from an existence preceding birth, in which the soul, unhindered by any corporeality, has glimpsed the eternal Ideas of things and thus also the true nature of geometric figures. Learning is therefore essentially recollection (anamnesis). Only a slight pedagogical impetus in the form of questions is required to set this process in motion.

an innate and hence a priori "pre-remembering" of wisdom that develops in the course of life and culminates in the knowledge of God. To seek God thus means seeking, in the forgetfulness of God (*oblivio Dei*, understood as a *genitivus obiectivus*), the signs of God's remembrance (*memoria Dei*, understood as a *genitivus subiectivus*)⁸ and allowing oneself to be led by the "traces" on the path returning to God.

In this way God is not only sought in human memory and through this memory but also ultimately found. Augustine offers a foundation for this hope in another passage that speculates both psychologically and theologically on the essence of the Trinity.⁹ In his later book *De Trinitate*, Augustine argues that it is not only God who is tripartite, with his three persons Father—Son—Holy Spirit, but also the human soul, with its three faculties memory (*memoria*)—reason (*intelligentia, cogitatio*)—will (*voluntas, providentia*). These two trinities correspond to each other point for point, so that in human memory the Trinitarian mark of the first divine person is at the same time discernible: God the Father as the personified memory of God. If this attribution is to have theological meaning, then the reference cannot be to a memory of words (*memoria verborum*) but rather only, in the strict ontological meaning of the word, to a memory of things (*memoria rerum*), which in God is identical with the whole of his creation. God the Father has created the world, and now it "is" in his memory—including the blind spots that have come about through man's sinful forgetting. Thus even the sinner Aurelius Augustinus, if in prayer he confesses to God the Creator his long forgetfulness, can expect a blissful existence in God's memory and at the same time hope that the sin of his forgetting will be erased forever.

5. REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING BEFORE GOD AND MEN (DANTE)

Death is the most powerful agent of forgetting. But it is not all-powerful. From time immemorial men have erected barriers against forgetting in death, so that clues suggesting remembrance of the dead are considered by specialists in prehistory and archaeology to be the surest indications of the presence of human culture. The rituals of worship of the dead with their pleas for intercession, sacrificial acts, and burial objects no doubt serve in many cases primarily to ensure that the dead person enjoys a smooth journey into the beyond. But gravestones always also serve as "monuments" warning the living not to forget their dead—and yet people often forget all too easily, for "life goes on."

Thus time is associated with forgetting rather than with remembrance. Our forefathers' wisdom drew the practical conclusion that private memo-

rials in the public worship of the dead should be set within a framework that, in the usual sequence of days of commemoration, strengthened memory beyond the grave and at the same time limited it through its social customariness. Thus an ever-greater length of time separated the event of death from the decreasing number of the customary occasions for a *commemoratio mortuorum*.

But if poets, using the power of their pens, *aere perennius*, make the commemoration of the dead their subject, then forgetting can no longer indulge in its usual sport with human memory. To have shown this in classical completeness is the privilege of one of the greatest poets in world literature, Dante, who built the immortal cathedral of his *Divine Comedy* around the commemoration of the dead that is constantly threatened by forgetfulness.

The Florentine poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) wrote this work, with its hundred cantos and 14,233 verses, at the beginning of the fourteenth century when he had been driven out of his hometown and in exile was threatened by forgetfulness. The poem deals with an imaginary journey through the three realms of the beyond, *Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory), and *Paradiso* (Paradise). This journey is also a visit to the dead: Dante is the only living person who has access to this world of the beyond. Consequently he alone has to bear the whole burden of this commemoration of the dead if we, the living in this world, are to have news about them.

We must begin by mentioning that Dante had already set forth the problem of memory in an earlier work entitled *Vita Nuova* ("The New Life," 1292–93).¹ This "little book" (*libello*), which combines poetry and prose, is a memorial to the—real or ideal—beloved of his youth, Beatrice, who died so young that Dante was not able to express to her during her lifetime all the veneration and love he felt for this "glorious lady of [his] memory" (*la gloriosa donna de la mia mente*). And now that she is dead and already among the "blessed" ("*beata*" *Beatrice*) in heaven, her memory here on earth is threatened by human forgetting since the young Dante's eyes are not immune to the temptation of turning to the attractions of other beauties, which these "damned eyes" ought not be permitted to do:

*Voi non dovreste mai, se non per morte
la vostra donna, ch'è morta, obliare.*

You should nevermore, even in death,
forget your lady who is dead.

In order to avoid all the seductions of forgetfulness Dante vows at the end of the *Vita Nuova* to devote the rest of his life to erecting a literary monument in enduring commemoration of Beatrice so that she shall be praised

"as no other woman has ever been praised by a poet" (*dicer di lei quello che mai non fue detto d'alcuna*).

This is the foundation in memory for Dante's *Divina Commedia*.² In the poem Beatrice, interceding from the highest sphere of Paradise, prays for the poet on his journey and collaborates in her own commemoration.



The spaces through which Dante passes on his journey through the beyond constitute a cosmic landscape in which the soul of each dead person is assigned its own place.³ He finds his way through this landscape with the help of guides, among whom the Roman poet Virgil at the beginning and the Christian Saint Bernard of Clairvaux at the end of the journey are particularly informative companions. The first part of the journey leads into Hell, which in Dante's imagined landscape has the form of an immense funnel that was produced by Lucifer's plunge into Hell long before the creation of the world of men. Dante climbs down into this "amphitheater" (Goethe) reaching to the center of the earth. Purgatory, in contrast, has the form of a conical mountain corresponding in volume to the Hell-funnel; hence it is also referred to as a "mountain of purification," whose spiraling ascent Dante has to make after climbing back out of Hell. At its summit is located the "earthly paradise." Dante finally comes to know the third realm of the beyond, the heavenly Paradise, which arches in concentric, crystalline spheres over the earthly world below. He is lifted up to these celestial heights and eventually proceeds to the most elevated sphere, the Empyrean, not far from where the triune God is enthroned in unapproachable brilliance.

On his journey through these three realms Dante encounters the souls of the dead, who are located in the place (*loco, luogo*) in Hell, Purgatory, or Paradise that is assigned them by the "great sentence" (*la gran sentenza*) pronounced by divine justice. He enters into conversation with them, takes an interest in their fates, and stores up their stories in his memory. Thus he becomes the universal memory-man, who can ultimately report in the verses of his great poem what he has seen at the various stages of his imaginary journey in the beyond and that has been artfully stored in his memory.

In Dante's *Divine Comedy* we have a precise literary imitation of the ancient art of memory (*ars memoriae*). We have seen that the basic principle of this art of memory is that all memory contents are to be conceived as "images" that the orator then deposits at specific "places" in a previously chosen memory-scape. In following his "path" the orator moves through the places of memory in order, so that he can call up in the right sequence

the memory images that have been deposited there (cf. above, chap. 2, sec. 1). That is precisely what Dante does. The souls of the dead he meets in the beyond are for him various memory images that he impresses on their respective memory places along with the latter, so that when he sets about writing his poem after returning to the "cheerful world" of the living he can call up from memory his encounters with the dead in the order in which they occurred. In this sense Dante's *Divine Comedy* as a whole can be seen as a memory artwork.

In Dante's poetic landscape of the beyond we must, however, consider not only the mnemological but also the theological perspective, in the sense of the Augustinian Memoria-theology (cf. above, chap. 2, sec. 4). We have seen that Augustine discerns in the psychic triad *memoria* — *intellectus* — *voluntas* a human image of the divine trinity, in such a way that of the three divine persons God the Father represents memory, God the Son represents the capacity for knowledge, and the Holy Spirit represents the will (or foresight). Dante explicitly adopts this speculation on the Trinity at several points in his work, including in the *Divine Comedy*. However, God the Father, as the quintessence of divine memory, is also the creator of the world. It follows for Dante's theology that the world produced by God the Father as his creation has its being in the fact that it *is* stored up in his memory. That holds for this world as well as for the next. Thus if Dante moves through the beyond as a landscape of memory in accord with all the rules of the rhetorical art, he uses his human memory to seek out God's memory (*memoria Dei*, as a *genitivus subiectivus*) in a poetic way. Dante discovers this, as a memory-man who has come out of this world, primarily by learning that all the souls whom he meets in the beyond have also retained their memories intact. They remember—with one exception that remains to be discussed—with the utmost precision everything that they have done or left undone on earth and that has determined their fate. In this way memory is ever-present in the *Divine Comedy*. But this is astonishing when one at the same time reflects that the Lethe, the river of forgetting, also flows through this memory-scape of the beyond.

We have been acquainted with the Lethe since the beginning of this book, and we have learned that according to the most ancient tradition this mythical and poetic river belongs to the topology of the underworld (see chap. 1). The waters of the Lethe have the power to take away from the dead, as they enter the realm of death, all memory of their earthly lives. This happens, depending on the sources of the tradition, in various ways. According to some versions of the myth the dead are sprinkled with the waters of the Lethe or immersed in them. More widespread is the notion that the dead drink the water of oblivion from the Lethe. Finally, in certain versions of the myth the waters of the Lethe work in two or more ways,

Lethe

erasing with increasing power the memories of this world. Thus Dante says in one passage that the dead "wash" one another in the waters of the Lethe, that they "consume" forgetfulness from this water.⁴

From the difference between the passages cited, a peculiar structural problem emerges that Dante has to resolve in his poem if he wants to provide everyone in the beyond with an undiminished memory. Where can Dante the author locate the Lethe in this memory-scape if Dante himself is a character in this poem representing memory and consequently may not be exposed to forgetting? Dante the memory-man is fully aware of this problem. Thus when, in the seventh circle of Hell, his guide Virgil names the rivers of the underworld, the Lethe does not appear among them. Dante responds with surprise, but Virgil promises to answer his question later: "Later you will see the Lethe" (*Letè vedrai*). In fact Dante still has to wait a while before he arrives at the bank of this river. Only at the end of the *Purgatorio*, in the delightful surroundings of the earthly paradise, does the river Lethe flow by Dante, and the pilgrim learns what effect this water produces: "it removes from people all memory of sin" (*toglie altrui memoria del peccato*). It follows from this that in all of Hell and most of the cantos in Purgatory, up to the earthly paradise at the end of the second part of the *Divine Comedy*, none of the souls Dante encounters are subject to forgetting.

But after they have drunk the waters of the Lethe are they then subject to forgetting? Even that can hold true only for an instant, for out of the same source from which the Lethe flows there springs in the *Divine Comedy* another river, the Eunoë, which means "good mind" or "good memory." In the blessed spirits who rise from the earthly to the heavenly paradise, the healing water of this twin river has the power to work against the oblivion of the Lethe and to strengthen in them the memory of the good deeds that they have done during their earthly lives, so that in this respect they can enter into heaven with a good memory. But through the Lethe these spirits have lost part of their power of memory since under the influence of the river Eunoë they can no longer remember their earlier sins (which certainly—in a venial form—must have occurred, even in a saintly life)—a deficiency with which they can probably forever be comfortable.

X And so it is that everyone Dante the pilgrim meets in the *Divine Comedy*, with the exception of the previously mentioned blessed souls, can engage with him in an exchange of ideas and memories with their mnemonic powers intact. The shift of the River Lethe's location to the earthly paradise, together with the opposing influence of the River Eunoë, makes this mnemotechnical work of art possible.

Deviating now from the order of Dante's pilgrimage through the beyond, let us first turn to the second part of the *Divine Comedy* in order to

error
of Lethe's
location in
Divine
Comedy

see how things stand with memory and forgetting in the *Purgatorio*.⁵ From this point of view Purgatory is the most interesting part of Dante's world of the beyond. This becomes particularly clear when one has Jacques Le Goff's *The Birth of Purgatory* at hand while reading Dante's poem.⁶ In this book, whose last chapter is devoted to the "theologian" Dante Alighieri, the eminent French historian shows how through the gate of Purgatory (human) time breaks into the beyond and challenges the domination of (divine) eternity. In this way Purgatory, which Le Goff calls a "temporary Hell," becomes the most human part of the beyond since the penitent sinners in Purgatory are the only ones whose fate is not yet entirely decided. It is true that, like the damned in Hell and the blessed in Paradise, they have already heard their ultimate sentence pronounced and can be sure that after completing the penitence for their temporal sins they will finally attain eternal blessedness. But the time they must spend as penitents in Purgatory is not determined once and for all. Thus for the souls in Purgatory it is possible that the time they have to repent in this realm of the beyond will be shortened through a divine act of mercy—in modern terms, by a pardon. However, the penitent souls cannot themselves provide the impetus for such an abbreviation; their life on earth is already over, and so they no longer have an opportunity to act and have an effect in any way. Only the living can act on behalf of the penitent souls in Purgatory, in order to bring about a shortening of their punishment for their temporal sins and to hasten their entry into heaven. But this can happen only indirectly, when their prayers move a saint, or especially the Madonna, to intercede with God on behalf of the poor soul.

Here again memory comes into play. A penitent soul in Purgatory is in a bad way if no living person fulfills his duty as a relative or friend (or even just as a Christian) and no *commemoratio mortuorum* is practiced. If this danger of oblivion threatens, then it is in the "vital" interest of the "dead" to send an emissary, an agent, a memory-man back to report on their penitent afterlife in Purgatory and to convey to the living their plea for help.

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Dante is this memory-man. The penitent souls in Purgatory turn to him for his memory as soon as they notice the presence of a living person in the realm of the dead. But is the pilgrim Dante willing to burden himself with all these messages? And if he is, will he be able to carry out his mission when so many souls in the beyond call on his memory? So far as Dante's willingness to help is concerned, it is not in much doubt since the poet shows himself easy to move to sympathy and compassion. But how comprehensive and reliable is his memory if he must store up such manifold experience in it? Is the pilgrim's brief sojourn in a given place in the beyond really sufficient to protect all he has seen and heard on his journey from being overlaid by memory images acquired in his further travels and thus driven into oblivion? A natural memory, no matter how good it

might be, would surely not be up to the task. Only a professional memory, a *memoria artificiosa*, can perform this feat, precisely insofar as the memory-man has been properly trained in mnemotechnics.

Let us examine two encounters—I am almost tempted to say two “cases”—by means of which the various aspects of our investigation can be illuminated. The first case concerns the Pisan judge Nino Visconti, who had been a friend of Dante’s. Divine judgment has assigned him to Purgatory, where a long period of penitence for his sins awaits him. May one hope that his widow might pray for his soul? Unfortunately not, it seems, because the widow quickly remarried, and her erstwhile husband in Purgatory draws the conclusion that she no longer loves him and has long since forgotten him. But luckily there is still his daughter Giovanna, on whose prayers her father now pins his hopes since a child’s prayer always comes from a pure heart. But precisely because she is a child occupied with her childish games it is not certain that she will think about her father. Children are forgetful. So here too a memory-man is necessary in order to counter childlike forgetting:

*Di’a Giovanna mia che per me chiami
Là dove agl’innocenti si risponde.
Non credo che la sua madre più m’ami,
Poscia che trasmutò le bianche bende,
Le quai convien che, misera, ancor brami.
Per lei assai di lieve si comprende
Quanto in femmina fuoco d’amor dura,
Se l’occhio o il tatto spesso non l’accende.*

Tell my Giovanna to pray for me
There, where the innocent are heard.
I believe her mother no longer loves me,
Since she has laid aside the white band,
For which later she will long in misery.
By her example one easily learns
How long love’s fire lasts in women,
If eye and hand don’t constantly rekindle it.

Against the rule “*La donna è mobile*,” memory seems not to be of much help; against childlike forgetting, perhaps it is.

The second case to be discussed in this connection is that of Marco Lombardo. This dead sinner is no longer at the beginning of his penitence but rather on the third loop of the path leading up the mountain of repentance. Thus he does not have an extremely long time to wait. Nevertheless when he tells Dante his life story he adds a request that the poet put in a

good word for him back on earth. Without hesitation Dante pledges to use his powers of memory to do so and promises to convey to the living this call for help from the beyond. In this way a regular chain of intercessions comes into being that reaches from the penitent Marco Lombardo to Dante the pilgrim, from Dante to the related people who are still among the living, from the latter to the saints, and finally from the saints to God, and which leads God to have mercy on the poor soul. If even one link in the chain fails, as when memory falters in one of the participants, for example Dante, then the whole chain of intercessions breaks apart and nothing changes in the penitent soul's fate in the beyond.

Yet how is this memory-man to proceed when on returning to the world he has to deliver so many serious, urgent messages? Will he perhaps travel in person from one addressee to another in order to carry out his missions? Here it seems to me permissible, since Dante's poem is addressed to a large audience of readers, to consider it, in accord with the immanent logic of his poetic fiction, as a highly faithful execution of the comprehensive task of remembering that Dante the memory-man has assumed in the course of his journey through the beyond.



Even more than in Purgatory, in Hell memory stands out against a dark background of oblivion.⁷ This should be understood first in a purely physical sense. For in accord with an ancient rule of the *ars memoriae* memory images, if they are not to be forgotten, must be properly illuminated in the psyche, not too brightly and especially not too dimly. But Dante's Hell is a dark realm, a "blind world" (*cieco mondo*). And in another passage Dante describes Hell by means of a striking synesthesia: "I came to the place where every light was mute" (*Io venni in luogo d'ogni luce muto*). What can be done to counter the associated danger of forgetting? The only technical, that is mnemotechnical, device Dante employs here against this impairment of memory is an invocation of the Muses, who are in fact the nine daughters of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. Dante calls on the Muses twice in the *Inferno*. The first, generally noted invocation of the Muses occurs at the beginning of the descent into Hell:

*O Muse, o alto ingegno, or m'aiutate:
O mente, che scrivi ciò ch'io vidi,
Qui si parrà la tua nobilitate!*

O Muses, lofty art, help me now!
O memory writing what I have seen,
Here prove your nobility!

Here the connection between the Muses and the memory they promote is clear. The second invocation of the Muses occurs at the end of the *Inferno*, at the point in Dante's journey where he is approaching the deepest and darkest part of Hell:

May the Ladies help my song
 Who once helped Amphion build Thebes,
 So that thing and word not be different.
 (*Sì che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso*).

Here Dante is once again referring to the Muses. But how can the Muses help memory? This question is easy to answer. The Muses help in an artful way since they are entrusted with the arts. With respect to memory, their help comes from the art of memory.

But this concerns only Dante's memory problem. The souls condemned to Hell have other problems. It is true that in Hell the dead no longer have any "vital" interest that could be directed to Dante the memory-man's art of memory with the goal of influencing the fate of the souls doing penance in the beyond; over the entrance to Hell stands the inscription "Abandon all hope, you who enter here" (*Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate*).

Nonetheless all the souls who suffer eternal punishment in Hell for their sins have a complete memory of their lives on earth, undiminished by any Lethe water, as well as of the grave sins to which they must attribute their damnation. But what is the use of such a memory? Dante answers this question in various ways. Some of these unfortunates seem to find it a comforting thought that Dante allows them to tell about their lives on earth and that therefore they can ask him to convey to the living what he has learned. Thus Ciacco Fiorentino, who ascribes his place in Hell to his "damnable sin of the gullet," implores Dante:

*Ma quando tu sarai nel dolce mondo,
 Pregoti che alla mente altrui mi rechi
 Più non ti dico e più non ti rispondo.*

But when you are back on fair earth,
 I beg you to tell about me there.
 I say nor answer more.

Similarly the sodomites, who in accord with the moral code of the time are banished to the seventh circle of Hell for their unnatural sexual practices, beseech Dante to ensure that on earth all memory of them among the living is not extinguished: "Make everyone talk about us!" (*Fa che di noi alla gente favelle*).

In this circle of Hell, Dante also finds to his dismay his respected teacher Brunetto Latini, whose "father image" (*imagine paterna*) he deeply venerates. Among the living Dante learned from him more than from any other master of words "how man achieves eternity" (*come l'uom s'eterna*). And now, because of his "mortal" sins, Dante meets him in Hell. Should he nonetheless have an afterlife on earth in the form of memory? Yes, this is in fact Brunetto's wish, and it must be primarily a literary memory concerning his major work, *Li Livres dou Tresor*. It is obviously important to Ciaccio Fiorentino, Brunetto Latini, and the many other sufferers in Hell whether to their eternal damnation a further condemnation of memory is to be added, a complete oblivion among the living that would make still more painful their hopeless fate in the beyond.

The "condemnation of memory" (*damnatio memoriae*) is a legal concept that has played a significant role in the cultural history of remembering and forgetting. In its most common form it proceeds from Roman constitutional and criminal law. In Rome the punishment of *damnatio memoriae* was applied primarily to rulers and other powerful persons who at their death or after a revolution were declared to be "enemies of the state." Consequently images of them were destroyed, their statues toppled, their names removed from inscriptions. From one day to the next many of their decrees were deprived of validity since even these references should no longer remind people of the "nonperson." For example, this is what happened, as Suetonius reports in one of his biographies of the Caesars, to the hated emperor Domitian after he was assassinated in 96 c.e. The Senate immediately had images of him (*clipei, imagines*) torn down and mentions of his name chipped out of inscriptions, all with the express purpose of "removing all memory" (*abolendam omnem memorium*) of him from the world.⁸

Some kind of *damnatio memoriae* is found in other ancient legal systems as well. In the Bible, for instance, we find the prophetic threat of punishment: "its very name is covered with darkness" (in the Vulgate, *oblivione delebitur nomen eius*, "oblivion shall extinguish its name"). In Christian canon law the *damnatio memoriae* was associated chiefly with the punishment of excommunication. And all these traditional lines seem to converge in the verse Freud cites from Heine: "Nicht gedacht soll seiner werden" ("his [name] shall not be thought").⁹

Back to Dante. On his way through Hell he cannot help the souls there who are doing penance for their sins. Their fate is sealed forever; their damnation holds for all eternity. The most Dante can do, when he is moved to sympathy and compassion, is through his memory work to keep *damnatio memoriae* from being added to *damnatio personae*. That is the only adjustment he can make, as a memory-man, with regard to the judgment that condemns to Hell—so far as the damned actually want him to do so. Bocca degli Abbati, for example, who is doing penance in the ninth circle of Hell

for his sins as a "traitor," rejects any such words of comfort for himself. Dante has accidentally struck him with his foot and injured his face as he is proceeding through Hell. As a compensation for this involuntary injury Dante offers to see to it that he lives on in the memory of people on earth. But this is not at all what Bocca wants, and he curtly rejects Dante's offer:

"I'm still alive, and you may be pleased,"
I replied, "if you prize your reputation,
That I mention your name with others."
And he said: "The opposite is what I want.
Go away from here and leave me in peace!"

Thus the name Bocca degli Abbati is inscribed against his will in Dante's memory book, and in his case as well eternal oblivion is avoided.¹⁰



In addition to the—feared or accepted—*damnatio memoriae*, we must note still another juridical aspect of Dante's *Inferno*: the legal principle of retaliation (*lex talionis*; in Dante, *contrappasso*, "counterstep"). This legal principle is commonly cited in the form of the Old Testament maxim "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Lev. 24:20), although it is found in many other legal systems, even today. In Dante retaliation is turned toward the transcendental and closely connected with his memory-theology.¹¹

As an example we can take the episode about the Provençal troubadour Bertrand de Born. The poet, whom Dante admires chiefly for his verses, is damned to eternal punishment in Hell because his political poems incited Henry, the firstborn son of King Henry II of England, to rebel against his royal father. Rebellion (in Dante, *ribellione*) is an abstract legal concept, to be sure, and it is consequently difficult to use mnemotechnically. In order to anchor it more firmly in the memory it must be made concrete and visualized in accord with the rules of the art of memory, and this is what in fact happens in Dante. The unfortunate poet appears in Hell before the horrified Dante and Virgil in the form of a memory image that produces a powerful effect on the pilgrim's imagination and thus also on his memory:

*Io vidi certo, ed ancor par ch'io il veggia,
Un busto senza capo andar sì come
Andavan gli altri della trista greggia;
E il capo tronco tenea per le chiome,
Pèsol con mano a guisa di lanterna;
E quel mirava noi, e dicea, "Oh me!"*

I saw clearly, and I see still there
 A headless body walking about,
 Like the others in that sad company.
 By the hair he held the cut-off head
 In his hands, swinging like a lantern;
 It looked at us and said: "Woe is me!"

Seen from the rhetorical point of view, a body without a head is an example, and even a schoolboy example, of what the masters of the art of memory called an "effective memory image" (*imago agens*), with the help of which the sinful crime, called "rebellion" in the abstract terminology of law, inscribes itself in a highly suggestive way—namely, in a completely graphic way—in the memory of the observer. Thus the concept is here transformed into a metaphor in order to be stored up in the form of a memory image. For according to medieval logic this metaphor—which Livy had made famous—of a rebellion ignited by a subject against his king is comparable to a revolt of the body against its head.

In this passage the legal figure of retaliation also comes once again into play. In the *Inferno*, where there is no longer any forgiveness for sins, the whole system of punishment depends on the principle of retaliation. As Dante puts it, "As I was in life, so am I in death" (*Qual io fui vivo, tal son morto*). In divine justice the two sides of the scale are precisely balanced, one (*quale*) holding the sin and the other (*tale*) the punishment. Moreover, Dante has chosen the episode of Bertrand de Born to make this punitive principle clear in an exemplary manner, and the canto therefore ends with these words of the unfortunate troubadour: "Thus you see in me the retaliation" (*Così s'osserva in me lo contrapasso*).

In the *Divina Commedia* the individual cases of retaliation are nonetheless only examples and to a certain extent the "administrative regulations" of a *lex talionis* governing the whole of the beyond, in which Dante's mnemological and theological thought completely coincide. This comes once again out of Augustinian memory-theology, which is also fundamental here for Dante, and in accord with the following reflections of the Church Father: Indeed, it is for the sinners who have forgotten God, as the Psalmist puts it (Ps. 9:18), that Hell was intended (*convertantur peccatores in infernum, omnes gentes quae obliviscuntur Deum*), although they can still gain salvation if they remember God again, even if it is late in their lives. For Augustine it is a question of his own certainty of salvation whether he can count himself among these sinners who finally return to God and are thus taken up again into his memory. For if on the other hand a sinner never returns to God, then the *aequum judicium* of retaliation will unfailingly be meted out to him in Hell, and the way he has forgotten God in this world will be the way he will be forgotten by God in the beyond. In this mnemo-

logical sense punishment in the *Inferno* is an expression of the eternal forgetting of God. This law also holds in the *Purgatorio*, although with the important qualification that the souls doing penance there are only temporarily forgotten by God. Correspondingly, the punishments in purgatory are subject to the legal principle of retaliation only within certain time limits.

It remains to mention the aporia that consists in the fact that in accord with Dante's Augustinian memory-theology we must see in the *Inferno* an eternal and in the *Purgatorio* a temporary place of forgetting, whereas both of them, insofar as they belong to the memory landscape of the beyond, are components of the divine real memory. Can there be forgetting within memory then? Yes, and this can even be seen as an experiential fact, as Augustine showed in the previously mentioned parable of the lost silver coin. According to Augustine one can certainly remember *that* one has forgotten something without knowing *what* one has forgotten. Thus God remembers *that* there are sinners in Hell, but he leaves no room in his memory for *what* they have done to him in their lives of sin and *what* they therefore have to suffer in the corresponding "counterstep" of punishment. The objective and automatic character of retributive punishment as *aequum iudicium* is thus here a "reified" punishment memory, which is, as counterstep, the immediate parallel of divine forgetting. Only in the *Purgatorio* does God's memory set a temporal limit to its own forgetting, that is, until the time of penance is over. Then the waiting soul—finally—enters into eternal bliss, which is to be understood mnemologically and theologically as an assured place in the everlasting memory of God. Thus in its three realms Dante's poem confirms for the beyond what the Psalmist and Augustine the Church Father had already taught about this world.



Whereas Dante's Paradise, as we have seen in our survey of mnemo-theology, is the everlasting real memory of God in which the souls God calls to bliss (including Beatrice) in the consciousness of their good works find eternal life, Dante, who becomes acquainted last with Paradise, as the final realm of the beyond, nonetheless remains a memory-man with a thoroughly human psyche. What can such a limited memory do in Paradise, even if it has at its disposal all the aids provided by the rhetorical art of memory?¹² Here we must consider the fact that even for this art of memory the retention of memory images depends on being properly illuminated in the psyche. They must not be too dark (that was the problem in the *Inferno*), but they must also not be too brightly illuminated. Precisely this "optical" problem of memory besieges the pilgrim Dante in the heav-

enly spheres of Paradise, and this specific difficulty becomes greater as Dante approaches the central light of Paradise, where the triune God is enthroned in "living light" (*vivo lume*). Here it is seen, to Dante's deep sorrow, that "too much light" (*troppa luce*) can also be detrimental to memory. The dazzling light of the heavenly spheres, and especially in the Empyrean, constitutes a danger to memory that proceeds from the fact that the visual impressions are perceived with dissolving and hence vague contours:

From now on my vision was far larger
 Than our language, which is not adequate,
 And memory failed to meet the demand.
 (*E cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio*).

The word *oltraggio*, which in modern Italian means "outrage" or "sarcasm," should be understood in Dante's verses as meaning "overpowering demand." The memory images that are, as it were, overilluminated by the splendor of the divinity overburden the memory and deprive the poet of speech.

However, the logic of Dante's metaphors obliges us to take into account another, no less disturbing side effect of this divine plenitude of light. God is the sun in this sky, so to speak, and from this sun proceeds not only light but also heat. In this way the "wax" of human memory can easily be melted. The verses about this suggest that "seeing so much" (*tanto veder*) far exceeds human mental capabilities. Hence, Dante does not even try to describe in earthbound words what he has actually seen in looking at heaven. Only the "affects" that are thereby produced in his soul may perhaps—with divine help—be accessible to human memory. Therefore what the reader can find in Dante's modest confession in the last canto of his *Divina Commedia* means very little in comparison with divine glory, insofar as the poet was allowed to actually perceive the latter during his pilgrimage through the beyond. Only a weak reflection of that *visio beatifica* remains in him, and even this remainder can only be put into language if Dante's prayer is heard:

*O somma luce che tanto ti levi
 Dai concetti mortali, alla mia mente
 Ripresta un poco di quel che parevi,
 E fa la lingua mia tanto possente,
 Ch'una favilla sol della tua gloria
 Possa lasciare alla futura gente;
 Chè, per tornare alquanto a mia memoria
 E per sonare un poco in questi versi,
 Più si conceperà di tua vittoria.*

O light supreme so far above
 Mortal conceiving, lend my
 Mind a bit of Thy brilliance,
 And give my tongue such power
 That I might leave a single spark
 Of Thy glory to future generations;
 So that, if something returns in memory
 And is heard a little in these verses,
 Thy victory shall be more conceived.

In the verses of this prayer we find once again the basic concepts of the art of memory (*mente, memoria*) in close contextual proximity to the expressions of modesty in which Dante formulates the subordination of human nature to the laws of forgetting (*un poco, alquanto, una favilla sol*). As readers, however, who have accompanied with admiration the memory-man Dante through the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, we have every reason to admire the poet in *Paradiso* as well because in this last part of the *Divina Commedia* he has succeeded in bringing to completion, with the drama of human memory and forgetting, the drama of human existence *sub specie aeternitatis*.