



An *Ars Oblivionalis*? Forget It!

ONCE, AS A JOKE, some friends and I invented advertisements for university positions in nonexistent disciplines. We divided these disciplines into four departments: *adynata*, or impossibilia, containing sciences that were historically impossible, such as history of the wheel in the pre-Columbian empires, history of painting on Easter Island, Aztec horse racing; *oxymoronica*, containing sciences that were self-contradictory and analytically impossible, such as nomadic urban studies, institutions of deviance, binary logic of the included middle; *byzantinica*, containing sciences of utter uselessness, such as potiosection, or the art of cutting broth; and *tetrapiloctomia*, or the art of quartering a hair, containing sciences of excessive subtlety, such as microscopy of indiscernibles.

One of the most interesting subjects was the *ars oblivionalis*, as opposed to the mnemonic arts. We had to decide whether this art should be classified in the Department of *Adynata* or in the Department of *Oxymoronica*. The uncertainty, as we shall see, is of no little import.

The *ars oblivionalis* was to elaborate techniques for forgetting. I repeat: techniques. In fact, it is possible to forget accidentally, as a consequence of repression, drunkenness, drugs, cerebral lesions. But these are natural events, which do not concern us here. Not only do Jakobson and Halle teach us that aphasia has numerous causes, but Johannes Spangerbergius in his *Libellus artificiosae memoriae* 'Book of Artificial Memory' already noted that it is possible to forget on account of degeneration, decline (owing to old age or illness), and the removal of cerebral organs. Mnemonic techniques cannot provide remedies for feebleness and surgical excision, but they can offer rhetorical precepts to make up for deterioration that causes us to forget things in the past.

The problem was to establish the principles of a technique and of a rhetorical art—and therefore

principles of a process that was artificial and institutable at will—that would permit one to forget in a matter of seconds what one knew. Imagining a possible formulation (without success) provided me with hours of amusement. The Latin memory treatises advised, for example, that one should associate a given syllogism or element of factual knowledge with a monstrous bleeding image in the third room on the right in an enormous palace. We can understand why evoking that scene could recall to mind the piece of information idiosyncratically linked to it or why, by cultural convention, Diana running in the midst of barking dogs could bring hunting to mind. But it is difficult to imagine how reevoking the same monstrous image could cancel, repress, abolish the notion previously associated with it. It is true that the same memory treatises, when it is necessary to free a system of *loci* or memory to make room for other notions, advised that one should imagine a man who removed images and tossed them out a window. But this technique allows one not to forget something but to remember that one wanted to forget it.

I reflected at length on the physiological and psychological reasons for the impossibility of an *ars oblivionalis*. I believe that in both cases there is a dialectic of contiguity and similarity. If object *x* has been in some way imagined to be in contact with object *y*, or if object *x* presents any sort of homology with object *y*, every time object *x* is evoked, object *y* will be as well.

But I do not see how one can imagine an object *x* that, duly evoked, acts in some way on the cerebral center to cancel object *y*. The Jakobsonian dyad explains how aphasia (and therefore forgetfulness) manifests itself but does not tell us how to produce aphasia and forgetfulness artificially. Or at least it does not explain how to reproduce them as cultural and voluntary phenomena. Neurophysiology can at best tell us how to act on the cerebral

centers to produce natural causes of forgetfulness effectively.

It is nevertheless not by chance that Jakobson took recourse in two linguistic-semiotic categories to explain the internal mechanism (if not the cause) of a neurophysiological phenomenon like aphasia. This suggests that we might see the art of memory (and consequently both recall and forgetfulness) not in neurophysiological or psychological terms but in semiotic terms.

I examine two problems: (a) to what extent a mnemotechnics is a semiotics and (b) why a semiotics, and therefore a mnemotechnics, is an apparatus inherently ill-suited to stimulate forgetfulness. Finally, even if in a tentative and less than satisfactory manner, I examine the way in which a semiotics can be used, if not to forget, at least to render recall more difficult.

I. Mnemotechnics as Semiotics

When I say that a mnemotechnics is a semiotics, I use the term *semiotics* in the sense given it by Hjelmslev: a mnemotechnics is a connotative semiotics.¹ To assert that the arts of memory are a semiotic phenomenon is little more than banal. Linking *y* with *x* in some fashion means using one as the signifier of the other. The fact that the signifier is frequently a mental image (a memory place can be either real or imaginary) does not change things. From Ockham to Peirce we have assumed that a mental icon or concept can be understood as a sign as well. At most we can ask ourselves, when places and images are only mental, what one must do to remember the signifying apparatus if one wishes to evoke the signified associated with it. This not inconsiderable problem is addressed, for example, by Cosmas Rossellius in his *Thesaurus artificiosae memoriae*. Rossellius suggests remembering a system of places in alphabetical order. This suggestion reveals that a mental mnemotechnics requires a mnemotechnics of activation in order to be used, which in turn requires another mnemotechnics of activation, and so on ad infinitum, with all the paradoxes that arise from every argument of the Third Man. In fact, even though Rossellius considers the mnemotechnics by mental signifier, he judges more efficacious, even if clumsier, the mnemotechnics that use places and images represented concretely, such as objects, paintings, statues, letters of the alphabet, or *litterae fictae* (i.e.,

alphabets in the forms of animals, vegetables, minerals, etc.).

The fact that mnemotechnics are a semiotic phenomenon was known also to the ancients, who insisted on the analogies between mnemotechnics and writing (Rossi 137, 144, 160, *passim*). Even the memory arts of the Renaissance, which cast themselves no longer as a simple practical instrument but as a source of cosmic knowledge or as an organic *imago mundi*, take as their basic assumption the idea that the world is a divine writing. Mnemotechnic signifiers do nothing other than reproduce an original cosmic writing, a tangle of *signaturae*, an organic labyrinth of significant similarities. As Ramus already noted, memory is the shadow of order (*dispositio*), and order is the syntax of the universe.

To say that a mnemotechnics is a semiotics means that one is dealing with an apparatus that orders a plane of expression, form, and substance and that this plane of expression is linked to a plane of content, form, and substance. Naturally, since the art of memory is a connotative semiotics, it has a crucial function that institutes the expression of its primary content (intuitively understandable) and its secondary content (the *res memorandae*) in functives.

A mnemotechnics is essentially a semiotics because, in its most elaborate form, it uses a syntactic system of *loci* (rooms of a palace or a theater, heavenly structures, etc.) destined to hold *images*, which assume the function of lexical units. These images are in turn linked to a system of *res memorandae*, which represent the corresponding units of content. At times these sematic units are arranged in structural relations and organized in a system of content that appears homologous to the system of *loca*. Thus the relation appears double: between syntax of expression and syntax of content on the one hand and between “lexemes” and “sememes” on the other.

There are mnemotechnics that choose another expression for their own content—for example, the verse that represents the various figures of the syllogisms (Barbara Celarent Darii Ferio) or those verses that serve to recall the names of the seven notes (*ut queant laxis resonare fibris*, etc.). Here, an expression like the three *a*'s of “Barbara” or the *ut* of the first verse, attributed to Guido d'Arezzo, is a linguistic expression that stands, in the first case, for a logical expression and, in the second, for a musical expression. The relation is motivated by the identity of expressive substance. The *a* of “Barbara”

is basically identical to the *A* of the traditional Aristotelian logical square, and at this point the person using this mnemotechnic device knows that a syllogism in "Barbara" is composed of three universal affirmatives. To this category of the *vocalis similitudo* belong the associations by partial phonetic identity as well, such as *hell* for *health*. Sometimes the initial of the name of the thing stands for the letter of the alphabet, and the thing is represented by an image. Cosmas Rossellius suggests imagining an ass, an elephant, and a rhinoceros in order to remember the word *aer*.

Mnemotechnics that link one syntactic system to another deal with relations between two forms of expression. An example of such a device would be a labyrinth with binary disjunctions that helps one recall a system of phonologically distinctive features. The real semiotic difficulties arise when one establishes the relations between expressive images and *res memorandae*. In the classical arts of memory, which emphasized the liveliness of the expressive image, the relation was often idiosyncratic and idiolectal. The image of a beautiful maiden on which Peter Tomasi of Ravenna insists with such sensuality in his *Foenix* could be linked to any content: passages of canonical law, verses of the classical poets, philosophical adages, and Ciceronian *sententiae*. Likewise, the relation between the system of *loca* and the content form could be arbitrary. It is with Renaissance mnemotechnics, with Bruno and with the followers of the Baroque "pansophia," that there comes to be a rigorous relation (a "real connection") between shadows and idea, between *signaturae* and *signata*, between symbols and *res*, so that it is possible to have "a building whose structures mirror exactly the structures of reality" (Rossi 112).

There arises, then, the problem of the rules for establishing and institutionalizing the similarity among the functives of the sign function. The relation between the syntax of expression (the system of *loca*) and the content form is normally established on the basis of projected homologies and is explainable in geometrical terms. The grid of a Pythagorean table is homologous to the grid of an urban settlement organized on an orthogonal plan, or on the plan of a Roman military camp.

More complex is the problem of the similarity between expressive images and units of content. We know that in the Renaissance the notion of similarity was fluid, not reducible to the figure of metaphoric similarity or to any of the forms of iconism that we habitually use today as a rigorous way of

analyzing according to degrees of iconicity. Even the ancients knew that any thing, given a certain description, can be similar to any other. For example, Cosmas Rossellius, after having affirmed that, "positis figuris, nunc consequenter quomodo ad memoranda efficientur, dicendum restat" 'given the figures, it now remains to explain how they aid memory,' and having noted that the best similes are those that are *in re*, admits that it is necessary to realize "quomodo multis modis aliqua res alteri sit similis ratione" 'how in many ways a thing can be similar to another from a given point of view' (2.8).

Let it suffice to leaf through the *Idea del theatro* of the most audacious among the authors of memory treatises, Giulio Camillo Delminio, to see how freely the most varied rhetorical practices come to be grouped together beneath the rubric of similarity. Even in a rapid reading of several chapters, one finds:

- similarity of morphological traits: the centaur for horse racing, the sphere for astrology;
- similarity of action: two fighting serpents for the military arts;
- metonymy for historical or mythological contiguity: Vulcan for the arts of fire;
- metonymy for cause: silkworms for clothing;
- metonymy for effect: the flayed Marsias for the scene of a massacre;
- metonymy for ruler and ruled: Neptune for the nautical arts;
- metonymy for agent and action: Paris for the tribunal;
- metonymy for agent and end: a maiden with a vial of fragrance for perfumery;
- antonomasia: Prometheus, giver of fire, for the artisan;
- vectorial iconism: Hercules drawing an arrow with three points and aiming toward the heavens for the sciences of heavenly things;
- direct inference: Mercury with a cock for trade.

A chain of inferences based on narrative frames: Europa on the bull for conversion and assent of the will but also for holiness and religion because

Europa . . . per lo mare portata riguardando non la parte alla quale ella è portata, ma quella onde ella si è partita, è l'anima portata dal corpo per lo pelago di questo mondo, la quale si rivolge pure a Dio, terra sopraceleste. . . .

Europa, . . . who, as she is carried over the sea, looks not in the direction in which she is being carried but toward the place from which she departed, is the soul, car-

ried by the body over the high sea of this world and still looking toward God, the land above the heavens. . . . (81)

From this last comparison we see how the excess of codified and conventionalized traits from mythology can permit absolutely unforeseeable interpretive chains. It is unforeseeable that the cock with the lion should recall the principality. The reason is that

[n]on solamente Plinio apre questa significazione, ma Iamblico platonico e Lucrezio ancora dicono che, quantunque amendue questi animali siano solari, nondimeno il Gallo porta negli occhi alcun grado eccellente del sole, nel quale riguardando il Leone si umilia a lui.

not only does Pliny broach this meaning, but Iamblicus the Platonist and Lucretius also say that, though both of these animals are solar animals, the cock nevertheless has in his eyes something of the sun's excellence, so that the lion, when he looks upon this, humbles himself before the cock. (94)

Furthermore, contextual choices intervene to determine appropriateness or similarity, because under Prometheus the cock signifies the principality but under Pasiphae it signifies the excellence, superiority, dignity, and authority of humankind (94–95). The elephant is traditionally a highly religious animal, but under Mercury it signifies religious fable telling and under Prometheus religion toward the gods of the fables (79).

In fact, it seems that all arts of memory unite expression and content in a way that is quite adventurous and asystematic. They try to link the form of memory places and of images to the form and furnishings of the world by establishing chains of homologous relations. But the arts of memory seem reluctant to elaborate a rhetorical logic of chains. Rather they set into play what I would call an interpretive hermeticism: everything can be the sign of everything else, and therefore the play of correspondences becomes Proteus-like. Thus at the very center of a metaphysics of the correspondence between the order of representation and the order of the cosmos one is witness to a kind of theater of deconstruction and of infinite regress. The relation, even when it seems founded on historical and mythological data that are quite institutionalized, turns idiosyncratic, even when the *idios* is not an individual but a historical and cultural setting. Consequently, the established associations, instead of being similarities of continuities supported by a

figurative logic, are to a great degree subjective. The emblematic tradition ends up institutionalizing them more on the grounds of inherited convention than on the grounds of any observable motivation.

Rossi (143–45) notes that, at least from Bruno on, images substitute for terms and topics substitute for analytics; traditional rhetoric had always classified tropes and figures, though in an unsystematic way, according to a recognizable typology, while it seems that mnemotechnics establishes associations without taking account of such categories.

Rhetoric, when brought into play, appears unobtrusively. Note how Spangerbergius lists among the various kinds of simile *effictio corporum* (gray hair and trembling in the aged), *notatio adfectum* (the wolf is voracious, the hare is timid), etymology (Philip as the lover of horses), onomatopoeia and *rerum effectus* (effect for cause or the activity itself for the specific actor).

The author I have found most systematic is perhaps Rossellius (but we will see how asystematic and casual his system is). He lists the following correlations:

by a sample: a quantity of iron in order to recall iron;

by similarity, which in turn is subdivided into similarity of substance (the human being as the microcosmic image of the macrocosm) and of quantity (ten fingers for the ten commandments);

by metonymy and antonomasia: Atlas for the astronomers or for astronomy, a bear for the angry man, the lion for pride, Cicero for rhetoric;

by homonymy: the animal dog for the dog star;

by irony and contrast: the fool for the wise man;

by vestigial traces: the track for the wolf, the mirror in which Titus admired himself for Titus;

by a word of different pronunciation: *sanguine* for *sane*;

by similarity of name: Arista for Aristotle;

by genus and species: the leopard for the animal;

by pagan symbol: the eagle for Jove;

by peoples: the Parthians for arrows, the Shiites for horses, the Phoenicians for the alphabet;

by zodiacal sign: the sign for the constellation;

by relation between an organ and its function;

by common attribute: the crow for Ethiopia;

by hieroglyphic: the ant for prudence;

and finally, the association that is totally idiosyncratic: any monster of any sort for anything to be remembered.

Although the rules of association may be fluid, an art of memory is a semiotics for another precise reason. Cosmas Rossellius understood this point

with particular clarity. The complexity of the expressive syntax he draws on in his *Thesaurus* is very striking. To remember something, one must be familiar with systems of *loca* that are quite complicated—so complicated, in fact, that for those systems that can be visualized easily, Rossellius must produce theaters of planetary structures, heavenly hierarchies, infernal circles; for those that are less given to representation by diagram, such as the series of animals, plants, and illustrious men, he is forced to rely on alphabetical classifications. This brings us to the first problem, already mentioned above: that of the techniques for remembering the expressions of an art of memory.

The second problem arises when Rossellius defines the images to be inserted in the memory *loca*. Units previously found among the *loca* (or the syntactic units) can also be used as figures (that is, as lexical units). A given fish can be the *locus* in a syntactic system that uses the animal kingdom, in which the lexical units are, for example, minerals and the content to be represented is the angelic hierarchy. But a fish can also be the lexical unit inserted in the *loca* represented by infernal circles, for example, in order to signify biblical precepts—even if, in principle, memory treatises advise maintaining a certain appropriateness between expression and content. As a *locus*, the lion serves to represent the letter *L*, but as a figure it stands for the devil. Figures of imaginary objects can stand for unknown letters of the alphabet; absinth can stand for aloe. But it is clear that it is possible to proceed conversely. If there is one expression that recurs frequently in Rossellius it is “e converso” ‘and vice versa’ (or its equivalents). *X* can stand for *Y* or “vice versa.” Rossellius’s mnemotechnics is a semiotics because a sign function, not the nature of the thing itself, determines expression and content. Anything can become either expression or content: “Ne mireris, quod quae pro locis supra posuimus, pro figuris nunc apta esse dicamus. Loca enim praedicta pro figuris (secundum diversos respectos) servire poterunt” ‘Do not look to the fact that what we considered fitting as the memory places above we now declare to be fitting as figures. The above-mentioned places then could serve as figures (according to the context)’ (78).

The condition laid down here is crucial, because an art of memory like that of Rossellius is not only a technique but also a cosmic representation. In abstract terms, we could say that to remember a few insignificant things one would need to remember

vast and elaborate systems of essential things. But the problem, it seems to me, is pragmatic. There is a virtual competence that regards every aspect of the universe, but one uses a very localized segment of that competence. The reasons for doing so are fortuitous: one remembers what one already remembers in order to remember another thing, which by chance one does not remember. The available pieces of information, potentially preexistent, can exchange semiotic function among themselves, according to the weakness or strength of our memory. If for one person it can be useful to associate the series of planets (known) to the series of angelic hierarchies, for another it can be useful to associate the series of angelic hierarchies (known) with the series of planets. In Rossellius’s semiotics, nothing is inherently expression or content, and everything can assume the function of one or the other as one likes, by a conventional decision, even if the potential correlation is based on some perceived appropriateness.

Paradoxically, the instruments of the art coincide with the totality of the content to be remembered. But one never even touches on the paradox of an expression that is remembered from the start and is more complex than the content to be remembered. Both coincide, and *memorans* and *memorandum* are constituted as such entirely on the basis of our local competence and our practical necessities.

II. Semiotics as the Means of Making Present

If an art of memory is a semiotics, then we can understand why it is not possible to construct an *ars oblivionalis* on the model of an art of memory. If one did, the *ars oblivionalis* would also be a semiotics, and it is proper to a semiotics to make present something absent.

Language—like all semiotic systems—has the ability to render present what is not present (even if only in the possible world circumscribed by our assertions). Because of this, says Abelard, the expression “nulla rosa est” (‘there is no rose,’ ‘such a thing like a rose has never existed’) in some manner brings to our mind the rose. And though the Rabelaisian question “utrum Chimera, in vacuo bombinans possit comedere secundas intentiones” ‘whether a chimera humming in the void can consume second intentions’ refers to a nonexistent thing, it renders present both the chimera and the second intentions, not to mention the impossible

humming that the chimera ought to produce in the void.

Thus the logical discussions about existential presuppositions appear naïve and senseless, as do such discussions about the truth value of the assertion

1. Yesterday Peter met his aunt
if one were able to assert truthfully that
 2. Peter has no aunts, therefore 1 is false or meaningless.
- In fact, no one is so silly as to respond to 1 with 2, and one will more likely respond with 3, 4, 5, or 6:
3. What aunt are you talking about? (assuming an error in the identification of the individual);
 4. You must have dreamed this up (referring to the existence of the aunt in a possible world);
 5. What do you mean by "aunt"? (assuming a lexical error);
 6. I didn't know that Peter had any aunts (correcting one's own beliefs).

Situations 3 to 6 occur because every assertion, more than presupposing, *posits* the entities that it names; it renders them present in the universe of discourse with semiotic force, even if only as the entity of a possible world. And if we do not wish to argue extensionally, let it be said that every enunciation of terms posits their intention. And if intentions are not material facts, they are at least, in some fashion, psychic facts, or they can be postulated as such. This means that every expression determined by a semiotic sign function sets into play a mental response as soon as it is produced, thus making it impossible to use an expression to make its own content disappear. If the arts of memory are semiotics, it is not possible to construct arts of forgetting on their model, because a semiotics is by definition a mechanism that presents something to the mind and therefore a mechanism for producing *intentional acts*.²

III. Strategies for Producing Oblivion

It is possible, however, to use a mnemotechnics (and, in general, a semiotics) to confuse memories, even if not to forget.

Let us consider several mechanisms in which a notion or expression is not forgotten but comes to be confused with other notions or other expressions. The confusion can arise both between expressions (confusion caused by pseudosynonymy, as when I confuse the words *paranomasia* and *an-*

tonomasia) and between an expression and two signifieds, notions, or definitional contents (as, for example, when one does not remember whether *fraise* means "blackberry" or "blueberry").

Neither of these phenomena ever appears by subtraction (there was something that then disappeared); rather, they appear by addition (two notions or terms are superimposed in memory, and one can no longer tell which is right). Normally the phenomenon appears when we make an error the first time or the first times; then we are given the right information, and from that moment we remember both the error and the correction without remembering which is which.

The first time I dealt with a circuit breaker to reactivate the electricity after a short circuit, I did not know whether I was supposed to push the green button and leave the red one up, or vice versa, to bring the light back on. I was told of course what the right combination was. But since then, every time I find myself in the same situation, I remember the problem rather than its solution. The psychological explanation for this is obvious: the problem made a greater impression on me than its solution did, and therefore it is the problem that impressed itself in my memory.

There is a game in which the dealer (who does not participate in the game) takes a very difficult word from the dictionary and announces it to the players. Each player must give a definition that he or she believes or knows to be false but that seems absolutely plausible. Then each votes for the definition that he or she holds to be true. The player who receives the most votes—that is, the player who imagines the most plausible false definition—wins. On a number of occasions I have received a word whose meaning I knew, though the word was unusual and difficult; after I maliciously constructed a good false definition, I was unable to remember which of the two definitions was the right one.

Thus, it is possible to forget on account not of defect but of excess, just as, though it is not possible to destroy the meaning of an assertion pronounced aloud, it is possible to pronounce another assertion in the same moment, so that the two assertions are superimposed. There are no voluntary devices for forgetting, but there are devices for remembering badly: it is necessary to multiply the semiosis. I can try to forget the syllogisms of the first figure by training myself to pronounce repeatedly, day after day, "Birbiri Celirant Doria Fario" (rather than "Barbara Celarent Darii Ferio") until I become in-

capable of remembering which of the two versions is the right one. I would be effecting a sort of cancellation by the multiplication of false synonyms.

One forgets not by cancellation but by superimposition, not by producing absence but by multiplying presences. And this explains why the authors of the treatises on memory feared that one might remember so much as to confuse one's ideas and, therefore, for all practical purposes, to forget. It seems, in fact, that at a certain point in his life Giulio Camillo apologized for his confusion and his slipping memory, blaming them on his long and frenetic dedication to the theaters of the world. On the other hand, Agrippa asserts, in his polemic against mnemotechnics, that the mind is made obtuse by these monstrous images and that, overloaded, it is led to madness (and, I deduce, to an insane loss of memory).

Another means of forgetting, also based on an excess of semiosis, is that of transforming an *ars memoriae* into a steganography, as happens in Porta, Trithemius, Schott, and Kircher but as would seem to happen also in Rossellius's *Thesaurus*. In order to remember the obvious, one invents al-

phabets that are difficult to learn, memorize, and interpret. Steganography might be the opposite of the art of memory, because the latter art seeks to render present while the former seeks to hide. But there are many links—hermetic links—and many mnemotechnics sought basically to make memorable to a few what could not be made memorable to many, while steganography in the end postulates a sender and an addressee capable of understanding the message clearly. To the extent that both arts multiply their devices, they can lead to the confusion already noted—but, once again, by excess and not by defect of semiosis.

So it has been established why an *ars oblivionalis* is not possible. It belongs to the Department of Adynata because it cannot be realized. But if we understand it to be a *semiotica oblivionalis*, it belongs to the Department of Oxymoronica, because a semiotics is by definition a device that stalls natural processes of oblivion.³

Milan, Italy

Translated by Marilyn Migiel

Notes

¹ For this discussion, I am of course indebted to the fundamental works of Rossi and Yates.

² A mnemotechnics has another characteristic that is typical of every semiotics. A correlation is based not on a simple and automatic equivalence but on a principle of inferentiality, however elementary it may be. If the sign were based on the simple equivalence and on the absolute synonymy (of the type /man/ = "mortal rational animal," /Zeus/ = "Jove"), mnemotechnics could not function (nor could a language function, for various reasons put forth elsewhere [Eco]). In order to associate the *definiens* with the *definiendum* one must know both in advance; it is also necessary to know in advance that the expression *x* stands for the content *y*. In a semiotics based on the principle of inferentiality and realized in contexts and circumstances, however, the sense of an expression is a packet, potentially a quite vast bundle of instructions for interpreting the expression in diverse contexts, drawing from it (as Peirce wishes) all the most distant illative consequences or, in other words, all its interpretants. In principle, we know every possible interpretant of an expression, and in practice we know that segment permitted by our individual or group competence, that is, by our encyclopedia. Interpreting the expression in context means *magnifying* certain interpretants and *narcotizing* others, and narcotizing them means removing them provisionally from our competence, at least for the duration of the interpretation taking place. I can know everything about cocks and not remember that in a given mnemotechnic system they are meant to recall the principality. And only

when I see them connected to Prometheus am I brought to activate a given zone of my competence and to recall the principality. Mnemotechnic cleverness, like the cleverness of every textual strategy, consists in fixing in some way the distinctive features that have to be recalled in the course of remembering, to the detriment of other features. In order to associate Proserpina with the underworld, an art of memory must establish that the rape of Proserpina, not the fact that she is a woman, is of prime importance. The memory treatises tell us how to select these features for the image we wish to impress in our memory, even if they do it in a highly unsystematic way, while contemporary representations of meaning used in semiotics and artificial intelligence seek optimal representations on which even a machine could operate to make later selections.

Only in this way, by learning the signifier, as Peirce argues, do I learn something more; and I learn this something more, basically, by learning something less—that is, by excluding all the other interpretations of the same expression that I could have offered. But such oblivion is transitory; it is a side effect provoked by the interpretive economy. In order to work, a semiotics presupposes the possession of an encyclopedic information. The process of production and of interpretation of texts, by contrast, encourages these passing pseudocancellations.

³ This essay was first presented at the Symposium on Semiotics and Memory. Centro di Semiotica e Linguistica. Urbino, July 1966.

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