Metaphors of Memory: From the Classical World to Modernity

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How can memory be understood if not through metaphor? It seems that every attempt at definition has necessitated this shift towards the figurative; each age calling forth a new language for tracing the contours of remembering, with these new-minted metaphors sometimes struggling to keep up with humanity’s desire to plumb the depths of its own past. The aim of this chapter is to examine the evolution of this language, to explore how metaphors have shaped our understanding of the mind. From the earliest characterizations of memory as a wax tablet or a storehouse to the modern mind-as-computer, metaphors have been used to offer models designed to illuminate a process so central to our understanding of what it is to be human that one might be tempted to call our species *homo recordans*.

Attempts to understand this history, are, however, a more recent development. Building on her groundbreaking studies of Neoplatonism in the Renaissance, Frances Yates’s *The Art of Memory* (1966) remains a seminal text for studies of memory, seeing the shift in its conceptualization as central to the wider transformation of an essentially magical worldview into what can now be recognized as the beginnings of modern science. More recently, Douwe Draaisma’s book, *Metaphors of Memory* (2000), has extended Yates’s analysis. From the earliest wax tablets of Plato, through medieval storehouses and Renaissance palaces, past cameras and microscopes, to the computers of our own age, Draaisma shows how powerful metaphors have been in conceptualizing the workings of memory, but he also explores how they have been deployed as prosthetics to enhance the natural capacity of the mind, the metaphor no longer simply describing the mind’s working, but instead seeking to enhance its natural capabilities.

Despite their variety, however, these metaphors have taken two main paths: one seeking to fix the shifting dance of thought in a stable substrate, hard and amberish; the other, perhaps more ambitiously, aiming to find a structure for consciousness itself, setting free rather than constraining the imagination. In the former category one finds the oldest of these metaphors, Plato’s wax tablet, discussed in the *Theaetetus*. Memory is viewed as a recording device: thought makes an impression on the memory like a stylus on a tablet, which can then be recalled at a later date. Although, as Draaisma notes, Plato distinguishes between those with a good memory whose wax is plentiful, smooth and easily receptive, and those
whose wax is less yielding, the memory is in essence passive and fixed; it is wholly separate from the thought itself, and is unaffected by its passage into time. One finds a modern companion to this view in the French critic André Bazin’s 1945 account of photography, ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’, where the photograph transcends mere representation to become, in his words, ‘the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it’. The photograph is a latter-day wax tablet on which the world can make its impression. In both cases an imprint of reality is pulled from the surrounding flow of time, each memory remaining discrete and intact: the mind’s arm then reaches into the void and plucks the desired sensation without disturbing those around it.

One extension of the wax tablet was, as Mary Carruthers has noted in The Book of Memory, the medieval metaphor of the storehouse in which the objects of the mind were arrayed. She cites Geoffrey of Vinsauf, who refers to his memory as a ‘cella’, and another, more celebrated Geoffrey, Chaucer, whose Monk claims to his Canterbury-bound fellow travellers that he has a hundred tragedies stored in the ‘celle’ of his mind, ready to be recalled at a moment’s notice. Here, one can see the mind becoming defined through an ordering of the objects of memory: it is not just the objects themselves that need conceptualizing; the structure that contains them now becomes part of the metaphor. The medieval fascination with this view was of course an effect of an education that was, by necessity, based on rote learning, permitting scholars to recall verbatim lengthy texts. In undertaking such an enterprise the memory required rigorous training, and it is in this process that one can see not simply memory viewed metaphorically, but metaphors being put to use to enhance the natural capabilities of the mind. Donald Beecher has noted that this alternative understanding of memory can be traced back to Aristotle, who offered a very different view from Plato in his On Memory and Reminiscence:

Contributing to this contrasting view was Aristotle’s realization that memory was fundamentally kinetic, that thought was associative, and that preliminary notions were critical to the recovery of buried chains of ideas according to their proximities and affiliations. He continued to believe that species, images, or phantasms were the fundamental units of thought and memory, but he made them active, exploratory prompts participating in associative networks, by which the mind becomes dynamic and creative. Memory was no longer about storage alone, but reconstructive intellection, no longer a container but a processor vital to the very operations of cognition.

This more dynamic view is to be found most famously in those celebrated mnemonic structures known as ‘memory palaces’: the ancient Greek poet Simonides, in a legend brought to wider attention by Cicero in his De oratore (written in SSBCCE) first noted the potential use of architecture as a means of visualizing and recalling information. Initially, this was to aid in the rather gruesome job of identifying the bodies of the guests at a feast, crushed to an unrecognizable pulp after the banquet hall’s roof collapsed. Fortuitously, there was one survivor of this catastrophe, the aforementioned Simonides, who had been engaged by the