The Art of Memory and its Relation to the Unconscious

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A way to characterize psychoanalytical cure would be to say that it is an endeavour to bring back to consciousness a memory—the memory whose loss prompted the various symptoms of nervous disorders. Thus it can well be defined as a process of reminiscence. It is then rather surprising that Freud’s work, where memory constantly appears as a watermark, makes so little of memory as a conceptual tool. Apart from the specific question of memory in dreams which is treated at the beginning of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the word rarely appears except as a concession to common language, and remains exterior to the analytical theory, though never far from it. I would like in the following pages to draw a comparison between two objects which seem *a priori* very far away one from the other: XIVth- and XVth-century *artes memoriae* and Freud’s researches on wit. I aim to make clear how close Freud is to a theory of the workings of memory as such, and why he nonetheless does not think in terms of memory. At the same time, though, I do not intend this investigation to be a demonstration that the truth of artificial memory, hidden to its mediaeval practitioners, lies in Freud’s theories. Rather, I would like to draw the parallels between the techniques of the art of memory and the techniques analyzed by Freud as a way to address not only the question of the logics of mnemonics but, at least indirectly, that of psychoanalysis.

What is the art of memory? It is an ensemble of techniques designed to improve or repair natural memory, and enable one to remember better and more. We do not know when this art was born, but it was certainly practiced by the Romans of the classical period, who left us the first texts precisely describing memory techniques; we also have indirect evidence that, like many other cultural items, these were inherited from the Greeks. The *ars memoriae* nearly fell into oblivion in Later Antiquity and the first part of the Middle Ages, to be rediscovered during the XIth and
XIIith centuries. This rediscovery took place mainly in Italy, at
the same time as the rise of the new civilian culture which
bloomed and reached its peak during the XIVth and XVth cen-
turies. The treatises that I investigate all belong to that period.

The art of memory relies on two sets of operations. The first
one is the building of a series of places, onto which images of the
things to be remembered will be deposited. By mentally strolling
through the places, one is able to retrieve the images deposited
there. The building of the places obey certain rules, one of which
is that the places are usually conceived of as rooms in a house or
palace. They are not pure space but really places. I will briefly
return at the end of these remarks to the question of space, but it
is a second set of rules which is my chief object of interest.

These are the rules devoted to the way of building images of the
memory objects to be deposited in the places. It may be provision-
ally described as a system of transformation of words into images.
At the outset, the memory object always belongs to language; it
may be a single word, or a group of words: a sentence or a whole
text. At the other end of the process, there are only images in a
series of rooms. One gets from the first to the second by a man-
ifold process of figuration, divided into two sets of operations: a)
the transformation of the original word or series of words into
visual material, through the use of a certain number of figures; b)
the building of an imago agens, as it is called in latin, a moving
image: moving means both an image in movement and an image
that moves the mind of the person who sees it. Rules to this effect
are the following: when the memory object is a person, this
person or its substitute in the image must be involved in some
action, if possible violent, obscene or ridiculous, so as to be espe-
cially striking and thus better remembered; when the memory
object is an inanimate object, it must be put to use, if possible in a
unusual way, by a human figure. Consequently, every memory
image takes the form of a picture, a story involving not only objects
and places, but also, and always, human figures dealing with
them.

Maybe the best way to describe this process is to look at one of its
canonical examples, found in the Ad Herennium, a classical treatise
on rhetoric where the most complete antique treatment of artifi-
cial memory known to us is to be found, also the main source used
by mediaeval and Renaissance practitioners of the art, no doubt
partly because of its attribution to Cicero, now known to be false. This example is used by the author of the *Ad Herennium* to illustrate the mechanics of memory for words (*memoria verborum*), one of the two parts of memory, the other being memory for things (*memoria rerum*). As an example of memory for things, one may quote Quintilian, who says that we can remember things having to do with navigation by the image of an anchor, or warfare by that of a weapon. Memory for words, however, rather than memory for things, is the depository of all the techniques of the art of memory, and as such, it provides the best ground for examination.

The example given in the *Ad Herennium* is the memorization of a verse: "*Iam domum itionem reges Atridae parant*" whose English translation reads: *And now their homecoming the kings, the sons of Atreus are making ready.* First, the verse is divided in two parts, each of them allocated to a different place. The image for the first part of the verse is the following: "Domitian raising his hands to heaven while he is lashed by the Marcii Reges" (in Latin: *manus ad caelum tollentem Domitium cum a regibus marciis loris caedatur*). The word *iam* (now) does not appear in the image, but the rest of it deals effectively with representing the words: according to the rules of scansion *domum itionem* has to be pronounced *dom'itionem*, which sounds very much like *domitium*. *Reges* remains, but it is specified: the *marcii reges* allude to an illustrious patrician family, the family of Marcius Rex, opposed to the Domitian family, as illustrious but of plebeian extraction. The image is that of "some street scene in which Domitian . . . is being beaten up by some members of the distinguished Marcian family."

The second part of the verse (*Atridae parant*) is memorized somewhat differently, by imagining "*Aesopus and Cimber* (two well-known actors of the time) *being dressed for the roles of Agamemnon and Menelaus in Iphigenia.*" These two images have been built using a number of rules: first a pun, a play on words; then, in the case of the Domitian and Marcian families as well as in the case of the actors, a rule that recommends that to impersonate the figures we need to remember, we use persons *known to us*. Finally, the beating of Domitian by the Rex is the literal application of the rule requiring memory images to be as striking as possible, here through the use of violence.

With the second part of the verse, a different kind of play with
words is at hands: whereas the pun's pivot was the assonance between *dom'itionem* and *domitium*, this time the play is with the multiple sense of *parant*. The figuring of *atridae* by the actors is both a case of using persons known to us to impersonate others—in fact using actors here means using the very figure of impersonation—and a case of verbal specification: *atridae* and *reges* both are the very words used in the original text and, through their second meaning, become a different element, producing a new visual scene.

Many of the traditional rhetorical figures appear in this example. As a matter of fact, if given a series of examples, more or less the whole catalogue of tropes recognized by classical rhetoric will show up: irony, allusion, synecdoche, metaphor, etc. But, as the verse we just read may have already prepared us to think, the rhetoric of the art of memory is somewhat different from normal rhetoric. It ignores its usual boundaries, in two ways: a) it uses figures with a greater density than everyday language or even literature: the proliferation of figures in memory images is extreme and somewhat anomalous, as the memorization of the verse suffices to demonstrate, b) the range of the figures in use is wider. The art of memory accepts as valid elements for the building of images, materials that would be rejected from other types of language because of their absurdity, low taste or lack of relevance. One could say that whereas in the normal use of rhetoric figures are subordinated to their enhancing the original meaning, in the art of memory the figuration process goes wild. The requirement that the figure be meaningful—as for instance in the anchor for navigation example—is most often dropped, and replaced by a curious delight—some would say complacency—for mere play with the sound of words.

To use Saussure's well-known categories, in the first case the signified is preponderant over the signifier, but in the latter the signifier is preponderant over the signified. In this respect, the figuration process used by the art of memory does not resemble so much literary or oratorical rhetorics as it resembles a lower kind of literature or speech: puns, jokes, charades, i.e. all the manifestations of wit. There figures are used not for the purpose of persuasion, but apparently for the sole purpose of playing with words and ideas. We may therefore be dealing here with two expressions of a same technique of the mind. In both cases we
find the same freedom in the use of figures, the same attachment to the letter of a text rather than its meaning, and the same lack of literary value. Many memory treatises are anonymous, as are most of the jokes we are told; both categories belong to the "cheaper stuff," and the question of their artistic value is irrelevant.

Now, if the mental process that constitutes artificial memory has not been thoroughly investigated—with the exception of a book by brain scientist A. Luriia about a contemporary Russian mnemonist whose self-taught techniques strangely resemble the ancient and mediaeval techniques—this is not the case with puns and jokes. Their analysis is the core of one of Freud's most undervalued works, although it is in many ways one of the most beautiful: Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious, or, as it has been more recently mistranslated, Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious. I shall from now on attempt to see how Freud's analysis of wit can be of help to describe and understand the mechanics of artificial memory.

Freud's work is divided in three parts: the first one is a semantic analysis of jokes and puns, which enables him to define several types of operations at work in their building. It is especially relevant here since these categories can serve to define memory techniques in a coherent way, whereas the memory treatises themselves provide us with very disparate modes of classification. The two other parts of the book—synthetic and theoretic—are devoted to exploring the hidden logic of wit.

In the first part, Freud divides his material into two areas: play with words—puns and calembour (wortwitze)—and play with thoughts, which do not involve necessarily puns, but work to displace ideas and significance through different types of association (gedankenwitze). We found a similar distinction in the art of memory: the one between memory for words, where every word, and therefore every sound, is to be stocked in memory, and memory for things, where a whole matter or story is first reduced to certain keywords before it is committed to memory and where association between ideas—gedankenwitze—is the first step required.

Freud begins by showing how the area of play with words, which appears at first as a haphazard multiplicity of figures, can be reduced to two operations: condensation and unification. The
first example given of condensation is the following: “In the part of the *Reisebilder* entitled “The baths of Lucca,” Heine introduces the delightful figure of the lottery-agent and extractor of courns Hirsch-Hyacinth of Hamburg, who boasts to Heine of his relations with the wealthy Baron Rothschild, and finally says: “And, as true as God shall grant me all good things, Doctor, I sat beside Salomon Rothschild and he treated me quite as his equal—quite *famillionairely*.”

The thought expressed here is not particularly funny: what is signaled is the impossibility for the millionaire to really treat a poor man as his equal. The wit therefore resides in the neologism *famillionaire* substituted to the implicit thought: he treated me (only) as familiarly as a millionaire can a poorer man. “The newly constructed word concides, in its earlier portion with the *familiar* of the first [thought], and its final syllables with the *millionaire* of the [implicit thought]. It stands, as it were, for the whole second [thought], and so puts us in a position to infer the second sentence that has been omitted in the text of the joke.” The joke-technique “might be described as *condensation accompanied by the formation of a substitute*.” Everybody familiar with Lewis Carroll’s tales and poems will recognize here what Carroll calls a *portmanteau*, i.e., a formation where, to put it into Humpty Dumpty’s words, “*there are two meanings packed into one word*.”

Condensation, though, is not limited to the construction of a new word from two others. Freud goes on to another example: “The voice of Europe once made the cruel joke of changing a potentate’s name from Leopold to Cleopold, on account of the relations he had at one time with a lady with the first name of Cleo. This undoubted product of condensation keeps alive an annoying allusion at the cost of a single letter.” Freud remarks here, by the way, that proper names are especially subject to that treatment. Indeed: they either do not have any meaning or have lost it. Here it is through the addition of an element to the original word that the condensation process is achieved. A comparable example can be found in the *Ad Herennium*, where the word *testis* (witness) is represented by the image of goat’s testicles (*testiculi*).

Other examples work through subtraction of an element: thus with a memory treatise where the word *cereales* (cereals) is remembered through its transformation in the image of pieces of wax (*cerae*) provided with wings (*alae*). If one takes into account
not the original spelling—the spelling of a word can vary in the same text—but its sound, one notices the suppression of the s at the end of the word. In each case, the modification of part of the original word or text is the means of its association with a new word or image carrying the second thought or memory.

One might stress here an understated but important law governing those figures. To be funny or striking, the condensation has to be as spare as possible, and the smaller the modification, the better it works. Cleopold is better than famillionaire; ceraelalae is better than testiculi. Thus a frugal ideal of economy seems to be at work in the process, an ideal even better embodied in the second type of operation recorded by Freud: the multiple use of the same material, or unification, where “a [word] is used twice, once as a whole and again divided up into its separate syllables, which, when they are thus separated, give another sense.”

This technique is to be found under different disguises: the repeated unit can be a whole word, without any modification, even of spelling, as in the following example: “Louis XV wanted to test the wit of one of his courtiers, of whose talent he had been told. At the first opportunity he commanded the gentleman to make a joke of which he, the king, should be the subject. The courtier at once made the clever reply: ‘The king is not a subject’.” The unification of the two meanings of subject—topic and person subjected to the sovereign—is the basis for this witty answer. A similar type of operation was at work in the memorization of the verse in the Ad Herennium: Iam domum itionem reges Atridae parant. There reges means, without modification, both kings and the name of a family, and parant refers both to the preparation of the return trip of the Atrides and to the preparation of the actors before the stage.

The repeated unit can also be the aural image of the word, as in a second example provided by Freud: “A young man was introduced into a Paris salon, who was a relative of the great Jean-Jacques Rousseau and bore his name. Moreover he was red-haired. But he behaved so awkwardly that the hostess remarked critically to the gentleman who had introduced him: ‘Vous m’avez fait connaître un jeune homme roux et sot, mais non pas un Rousseau.’ [You have made me acquainted with a young man who is red-haired and silly, but not a Rousseau]. This process of unification is also to be found in adulterated form, as in the Italian
expression *Traduttore, traditore!* (Translator, traitor!). There a slight modification is necessary to produce the wit. Even though unification in this example resembles very much condensation, it remains different, in that the new thought expressed through the wit does not remain hidden. It does not need any reduction to become explicit.

Parallel to these plays with words, the wit and the art of memory play with ideas, operating not on the signifier but displacing the signified. I will mention only three examples, since once more the figures used are part of the traditional catalogue of rhetorical tropes. *Juxtaposition* is the first one. Just as double meaning (*double entendre*) is the most economical mode of unification when dealing with words, juxtaposition is the most economical mode of unification when dealing with thoughts. Unifying two heterogeneous objects or concepts, or one object and a concept, by the conjunction *and* is a way to make them funny or striking. This is important, notwithstanding its banality, since a) it is the most basic link between two words or things: it does not presuppose any meaningful liaison between them other than the will to put them together; and b) it is also the means by which both places and images are organized in artificial memory: images and places are set beside each other, and that is the one and only principle or order, whatever the nature of the memory object: abstract, concrete, big, small, etc. Here too, then, economy seems to be the guiding principle.

The mention of places and images is an invitation to go back to a figure alluded to before, an important one since it organizes every image: the rule that calls for images to be striking. This can be achieved, according to the *Ad Herennium*, "if we assign to them exceptional beauty or singular ugliness; if we dress some of them with crowns or purple cloaks, for example, so that the likeness may be more distinct to us; or if we somehow disfigure them, as by introducing one stained with blood or soiled with mud or smeared with red paint, so that its form is more striking, or by assigning certain comic effects to our images, for that too will ensure our remembering them more readily." One cannot but recognize here *hyperbole* (overstatement), a cherished instrument of jokes as well as of rhetoric.

I should also mention that representation by opposites (*irony*) is both cited by memory treatises and by Freud in his analysis.
Sometimes the opposition is neutral, as when one uses black to signify white, sometimes it is charged with underlying criticism, as in this Freudian example, again taken from Heine: "This lady resembles the Venus of Milo in many respects: she, too, is extraordinarily old, like her she has no teeth, and there are white patches on the yellowish surface of her body." The Venus of Milo, the very ideal of classical feminine beauty for the XIXth century, is thus presented in ways that signify the very opposite of beauty.

Let us call an end to this enumeration and reflect on the preceding figures. All of them point to a feature common to wit and the art of memory: the preference for extraneous modes of association, such as simultaneity, spatial contiguity, assonance, as opposed to intrinsic modes such as causality, resemblance, etc; the preference for accident as opposed to meaningful relations. All of them also have in common a striking tendency towards economy of means, all the more striking since this tendency, easily recognizable in the particular figures, pertains to a project which, in general, can be characterized as excessively spendthrift.

Indeed, now that we have described in sufficient detail the operations common to wit and the art of memory, it may be time to ask a question about artificial memory that the reader of this article may already have been silently entertaining for a while: what is the use of these transpositions? Has something really been gained? If so, what is it? Is the price paid for that gain worth the effort?

These are legitimate questions. Even the best historian of the art of memory, Frances Yates, whose interest and fervor are unquestionable, cannot refrain from writing: "there were inert or lazy or unskilled people in Cicero's time who took the common sense view to which, personally I heartily subscribe—as I explained earlier I am a historian only of the art, not a practitioner of it—that all these places and images would only bury under a heap of rubble whatever little one does remember naturally." These considerations may lead us to believe that the art of memory is a curiosity, the grotesque fruit of mediaeval scholars' minds, and deserves to be studied only as such. This cannot account for the wide use and cultural significance of memory techniques from the XIIth to the XVth century unless we think that the practitioners of these methods were equivalent to the primitives of late XIXth-century anthropology.
We would have to presuppose a kind of mentalité primitive, foreign to us moderns, that we are entitled to decipher, being more rational than the people we study. Thus Yates' otherwise admirable study oscillates between the recognition of ars memoriae as a cultural configuration informing and shaping the thinking of a period but somewhat offensive to common sense—which implies some intellectual perversity on the part of its users—and its reduction to games played by clerks and scholars which, notwithstanding their interest for the study of intellectual history, do not have much validity in themselves; but why then, did such a "curiosity" enjoy such success, most of all in humanist Italy?

The second possible hypothesis is that there is a "hidden" economy of artificial memory, which it is difficult for us to perceive today, since with very few and culturally insignificant exceptions, this art has not been practiced for three or four centuries. Could it be that the extensive amount of work required to put it to use is somehow worth the effort? To answer this question, it is not enough to identify the figures at work in the process; their dynamics must also be understood. This means leaving the field of semantic analysis to take into account the psychological forces figures are invested with. And this is where Freud's analysis once again becomes relevant. In dealing with the "tendency to economy" characterizing figures in wit, Freud finds himself confronted with the very problem posed by memory images:

The economies made by the joke-technique do not greatly impress us. They may remind us, perhaps, of the way in which some housewives economize when they spend time and money on a journey to a distant market because vegetables are to be had a few farthings cheaper. What does a joke save by its technique? The putting together of a few new words, which would mostly have emerged without any trouble. Instead of that, it has to take the trouble to search out the one word which covers the two thoughts. Indeed, it must often first transform one of the thoughts into an unusual form which will provide a basis for its combination with the second thought. Would it not have been simpler, easier, and, in fact, more economical to have expressed the two thoughts as they happened to come, even if this involved no common form of expression? Is not the economy in words uttered more than balanced by the expenditure on intellectual effort? And who saves by that? Who gains by it?22

To answer his question, Freud noted the element of play common in jokes, a feature it shares with the figures of the art of memory: “Play appears in children while they are learning to
make use of words and put thoughts together. . . . In doing so, they come across pleasurable effects, which arise from a repetition of what is similar, a rediscovery of what is familiar, similarity of sound, etc., and which are to be explained as unsuspected economies in physical expenditure.”24 This first stage of activity is brought to an end by the gradual strengthening of “the critical faculty or reasonableness.” Play becomes “meaningless or actually absurd” and cannot take place without the consciousness of doing something forbidden by reason as well as social rules. The pleasure derived from it cannot be revived, except when, under special circumstances, the critical inhibition can be lifted. One way that we find our way back to the original pleasure of play with words is through jests and jokes, for they are used to carry a meaningful thought, and thus are legitimate. “The joke-work . . . shows itself in a choice of verbal material and conceptual situations which will allow the old play with words and thoughts to withstand the scrutiny of criticism; and with that end in view every peculiarity of vocabulary and every combination of thought-sequences must be exploited in the most ingenious possible way.”25 The techniques of jokes are therefore really “the sources from which jokes provide pleasure, and we feel that there is nothing strange in other procedures drawing from the same sources for the same end.”26 What Freud demonstrates here for jokes constitutes a valid analysis of all kinds of figures: any language making a large use of figures—be it poetry, literature or jokes—attempts to get access to the usually forbidden activity of play with words, here validated through the expression of serious or meaningful content. This is true even when, as is most often the case, the figures are “innocent,” when they seem to function as ornaments which do not add any meaning to the thought expressed. A high rate of figures, in any given language, is a way of retrieving the childish pleasure of play and a form of protest against the constraints of reason, whatever the content of the figure. Wit and the art of memory, with their overexposed use of figures, lay bare one of the psychic logics of all figures.

The examples that we have given above, however, have one thing in common: their lack of innocence, or, to put it in Freud’s own terms, their purpose. Play cannot entirely account for the pleasure they afford. We have to look further at the content they express.
Taking a second look at them, we will find that what has been added by the figure is a “second thought” that cannot be expressed openly, an affect that cannot be vented without disguise. It is obviously the case with the first examples we gave: famillionaire and Cleopold. In the first, Hyacinth expresses resentment in response to the condescending attitude of Rothschild, at the same time that he boasts about his intimacy with him. In the second there is a sexual innuendo. The king’s social position makes a direct assertion of what is only implied in the joke very difficult. The Rousseau anecdote also expresses a latent hostility, as does the remark involving the Venus of Milo. In the first case, the hostess expresses her resentment at the guest who introduced such a silly man to her, while still clinging to an etiquette of good breeding. In the second, the wording of a comparison supposedly elaborated to praise beauty is made to express the author’s strong disgust. In economical terms, these jokes are shorter than would the two thoughts they involve, if both thoughts were expressed in their entirety. We know, however, that they cannot be. The second thought has to remain implicit, or rather expressed indirectly. Thus, the need for restraint gives use to the “economy” so characteristic of wit.

From this, memory images can be better understood. The use of transpositions to build images appears to be a long and wasteful detour from the operations of plain, natural memory. Memory images, however, are not longer. They are shorter. They are in reality an economical way of expressing thoughts that cannot be expressed openly. Even when the rules do not explicitly require it, the examples offered by manuals of the art of memory all have a purpose, and that purpose is either hostility or obscenity. I shall cite but a few samples from the plentiful material available.

The idea of joining affects to images is found in the rule that requires images to be moving and that human figures be part of every image. It is recommended we use “somebody whom we know, whether as a friend or as an enemy, who will be standing and doing, in this place something ridiculous or unusual, or saving such a thing: for instance, that a Peter (the name here to be remembered) be in the first place, who would kill a man that you know; or who would threaten with his naked sword; or still who would eat or drink something extravagant.”27 The choice of a friend or an enemy is a first intimation of the lack of neutrality of the supporting image which is required. It is only
when we put these figures together with the techniques used to make them striking that the underlying pattern, however, comes to light. When the *imago agens* is that of somebody about whom I feel positively, then either he or she is the author of a violent or ridiculous act, (a fantasy which clearly exhibits latent feelings of hostility) or he or she is the victim (and here too one can identify hostility). When we think of someone we know as an enemy, his or her representation as a murderer or a bully clearly serves to embody hostile feelings.

All the structural possibilities then point in a single direction: the expression of hostility. (There is even more hostility when we use irony as a memory device, as when the image of a righteous person we know is linked to "shameful and dirty deeds," or when a low character is given an image full of dignity and honor. In this case, a kind of *cynicism* which is a veiled critique of society and its hypocrisy is added to the expression of hostile feelings towards an individual.)

Hostility and aggressivity are built in the most general rules governing the formation of images. This is usually not the case with the other important initial underlying memory images, the expression of obscene thoughts or sexual desire. One exception is found in a treatise by one of the most illustrious "memory doctors" of the late XVth century, Peter of Ravenna, who advises his reader to use "*most beautiful lasses*" as supporting images. "You know now a secret most useful to memory, a secret I long had to keep for myself because of modesty: if you wish to remember swiftly, put in the places the most beautiful virgins."28 This advice, although not found in such general form elsewhere, is put to use in other treatises, such as Leonardo Giustiniani's, where the city of Venice is made to resemble "a young virgin known to me."29 (This is, by the way, a clear indication of the necessity which lies behind the female allegories of the paintings of that time.)

Most of the sexual purposes, revealed by the manuals, however, have less to do with the expression of adult male desire than with the expression of childish obscenities. Obscene images are not identified as such in the rules, but they are to be found under the heading of ridiculous, extravagant or shameful attitudes. Thus the image of murder and threat that I mentioned earlier is immediately followed by another example of a "*ridiculous or unusual act,*" "John stood in a tavern, and peed or exposed his pudenda."30 The
image of a man peeing (often on the image of what is to be remembered) or exposing himself is frequently found in the explanation of the most general rules governing the formation of images, as here, or in examples where a verbal transposition is used. The assonance between the word or group of words to be remembered and another associated with sexual matters provides the material out of which the image is built. In another example, the object of memory is an Italian surname: Gallochino di Bollabechi. The final image for it is a rooster bent on a man, pecking his testicles, which can be accounted for by the so puns: rooster is gallo (unification); this gallo is chinato, bent on a man (condensation by addition); it is pecking, becca (unification again) the balls, bolla, (unification once more).  

What is most notable in these images is the infantile character of their sexuality. The insistence on exhibitionism and excrements suggests that "mnemonic obscenity" is a special instance of a more general tendency: the tendency to return to "the stage of childhood, so as once more to gain possession of the childish source of pleasure" and in so doing make use of the unconscious, "for the infantile is the source of the unconscious, and the unconscious thought-processes are none other than those—the one and only ones—produced during early childhood."  

Wit and artificial memory use the same techniques—rhetorical figures—with the same unusual degree of freedom, which we have traced to the desire to go back to a childish play with language and to the compromises required if it is to be allowed satisfaction. Both are loaded with the expression of hostile and obscene thoughts, which are not allowed to be freely thought or spoken. The same resources, in fact, are put to work by both wit and artificial memory.  

The ways they are put to work are, however, very different. Of these differences, three are striking. Wit is intended to yield laughter, and often does, whereas memory images are not funny, even though they rely upon the same techniques. Wit is directed to another ("The psychical process of constructing a joke seems not to be completed when the joke occurs to one: something remains over which seeks, by communicating the idea, to bring the unknown process of constructing the joke to a conclusion."  

Memory images are quite unlike this, for they are explicitly intended for one's own use. The ones we read about exist only
as examples of an otherwise wholly private and self-addressed process.

These differences are not accessory. Through them it is possible to understand the particular working dynamics of the art of memory, as we shall now see. What is at stake in the presence or absence of an addressee, or of laughter? Answering this question requires a further look at the conditions that provoke laughter. First, a “third person” is necessary. Second, to be effective, a joke has to be grounded in a context shared both by the addresser and the addressee. Context here has a factual meaning. The addressee must know the circumstances underlying the joke or pun. The number of jokes that have current or recent events as their subject illustrates this point. Context also has a psychological meaning, somehow even more important than the factual meaning: addresser and addressee must partake of the same culture and inhibitions, otherwise they will not laugh.34

This feature is the key to the understanding of the addressee’s reaction: “He must be able as a matter of habit to erect in himself the same inhibition which the first person’s joke has overcome, so that, as soon as he hears the joke, the readiness for this inhibition will compulsively or automatically awaken. This readiness for inhibition, which I must recognize as a real expenditure, analogous to mobilization in military affairs, will at the same moment be recognized as superfluous or too late, and so be discharged in statu nascendi by laughter.”35 Thus, whereas the addresser has had to work to produce the joke, the addressee “has bought the pleasure of the joke with very small expenditure on his own part. He might be said to have been presented with it.”36 The possibility of laughter is linked to the absence of effort, or more precisely to the realization that the energy mobilized can be freely discharged. This first laugh, once released, releases in turn the addresser’s laughter: his effort having attained its goal, does not need to be sustained any longer, and is discharged in laughter too.

We can see now the role played by the addressee in the joke-process, and what is the function of laughter in its economy. Let us turn now to memory images, to see why they are not funny, and how they work.

Two moments can be distinguished in the operations of artificial memory: a) the building of the image, and its allocation to a place; b) its recollection, and through it the recollection of the
memory object. In the first stage, the author of the image is both addresser and addressee. As the addresser, he is spared none of the expense associated with the use of figures; therefore he cannot laugh. Moreover, addresser and addressee being one, he, as the addressee, knows all the workings of the joke; he is in the position of someone to whom a joke would be explained as it is unfolded—certainly the best way to kill laughter. Finally, because of the absence of external addressee, the psychic expenditure attached to the figures cannot be discharged, and remains suspended.

It is this suspended energy which is used in the second stage—the act of recollection—when the reading of the image brings forth the memory object associated with it. The author of the image retrieves the image, not as a construction of figures needing to be read one after the other as a text, but as an immediate presence, a vision given as a whole; one then occupies the position of the addressee, who is spared the work of building the image, and therefore can release the spared psychic energy. But, in contrast to the joke process, where the energy thus released is discharged in laughter, in the memory process it is immediately reemployed in reading the image: seeing it, one retrieves the memory object encapsulated in the figures. One does not laugh because one remembers.

Finally, while the play of wit may evoke images, its aim wholly pertains to language, to an alliance between significance and sound. The aim of artificial memory, however, is an image, a visual product like another product of the mind which is self-addressed: the dream.

Freud’s theory of dreams is today familiar to everybody. The dream “appears as a mesh-work of sense-impressions, mostly visual but also of other kinds, the illusion of an event, with which thought-processes and expressions of affect may be mingled.” This memory of the dream, which is often “entirely absurd and confused,” Freud calls “the dream’s manifest content.” But this “strange manifest content can regularly be made intelligible as a mutilated and altered transcript of certain rational psychical structures which deserve the name of latent dream-thoughts... In the case of adults, it seems to be a generally binding condition that the [thought] which creates the dream shall be one which is alien to conscious thinking—a repressed wish—or will possibly at least
have reinforcements that are unknown to consciousness. . . The action of this unconscious wish upon the consciously rational material of the dream-thoughts produces the dream." The dream is therefore the disguised expression of an unconscious thought, which can be retrieved by identification of the figures used to disguise it, just as the retrieval of the memory image enables one to recall what is to be remembered.

The thought-process governing dream-work is in other respects also similar to the techniques of the art of memory. It has high density of figures, even higher than memory images. Furthermore, they are the same figures preferred by the manuals of artificial memory: the dream, too, replaces "internal associations (similarity, causal connection, etc.) by what are known as external ones (simultaneity, contiguity in space, assonance)." Our memory of dreams is that of a continuous present, which replaces all tenses and modes. This perception accounts for the difficulty, when we wake up, of telling what happened in our dream in its chronological order. Our recall is like a series of pictures set side by side. Memory images achieve the same result. When they have been built, every element relating to time has disappeared, to be converted in spatial relations: each image is set in a place, and places are set one beside the other. It would appear that the suppression of time and causal connection is a chief aim of artificial memory.

In some ways, then, the art of memory is closer to dream-work than it is to the techniques of wit. In other respects, it is closer to wit. And in one significant dimension, it is unlike both. The energy, which in wit is discharged in laughter, and in dreams is used to express hidden thoughts without letting them be consciously acknowledged, is there mobilized to "charge" the memory object, through the use of figures, with affects, giving its image the power of dreams. Artificial memory appears therefore as an original attempt to domesticate energies that are usually ignored, when not feared or denied. This domestication of the Unconscious may be looked at in different ways. Whereas Freud's work emphasizes the necessity of the analyst's work as the only way to gain access to the real meaning of the figures used by the Unconscious, the art of memory speaks a different language. It is not so much interested in interpretation as in putting the figures to practical use, thus making a conscious use of preconscious
material; the control and expansion of memory replace interpretation, one wonders with what consequences on the economics of the soul.

For by channelling preconscious material into images and putting them to work, isn't artificial memory trying to tame the untamable? It is perpetually threatened by two equally destructive extremes: a process of figuration bursting out of control, unable to perform the minimum task of self-communication, and eventually leading to psychosis; E. Kris sees such a case in the person of Opicinus de Castris, an early XIVth century clerk whose mnemonic devices are based on the techniques we described, and are one of the few evidences of medieval memory drawings: these drawings, along with the text they frame allude to a personal history filled with depressive episodes, and they may be seen as both an expression of these episodes and a failed attempt at curing himself. Another extreme is the tight and repressive control of the material used in the building of figures, which, by paying excessive dues to decency and normal social communication, uses images too bland to build any psychic tension and fuel the memorizing process. The fragile balance between these two extremes does not depend only on individual work, but more probably on cultural and social conditions such as can be found in the centuries when the treatises flourish, and such as cannot be artificially recreated today.

Thus, if the art of memory is not a mere antiquarian's curio and deserves to be studied on its own ground, the balance between what it has to say about the economics of the soul and what belongs to a particular episode in cultural history is a delicate one. Freud's work on wit would have made of him a prime candidate to this study and one cannot but dream of his encounter with the ars memoriae manuscripts lying in his beloved Padua, Florence and Rome. That this dream cannot be realized should not prevent others from taking on the task.

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NOTES

8. Freud, p. 16.
13. "Hoc modo, ut si accusator dixerit ab reo hominem veneno necatum et hereditatis causa factum arguerit et eius rei multos dixerit testes et conscios esse. Si hoc primum, et ad defendendum nobis expeditum sit, meminisse volemus, in primo loco rei totius imaginem conformabimus; aegrotum in lecto cubantem faciemus ipsum illum de quo agetur, si formem eius detinebimus; si eum non loco agnoverimus, et aliquem aegrotum non de minimo loco sumemus, ut cito in mentem venire possit. Et reum ad lectum eius adstituemus, dextera poculum sinistra tabulas, medico testiculos arietinos tenentem." (For example, the prosecutor has said that the defendant killed a man by poison, has charged that the motive for the crime was an inheritance, and declared that there are many witnesses and accessories to this act. If in order to facilitate our defense we wish to remember this first point, we shall in our first background form an image of the whole matter. We shall picture the man in question as lying ill in bed, if we know this person. If we do not know him, we shall yet take some one to be our invalid, but not a man of the lowest class, so that he may come to mind at once. And we shall place the defendant at the bedside, holding in his right hand a cup, and in his left tablets, and on the fourth finger a ram’s testicles.) *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, III. xx. 33., p. 215.
15. Freud, op. cit., p. 31.
18. Freud, p. 34.
19. Cf. another example from Heine reported by Freud: “Speaking generally, the inhabitants of Gottingen are divided into students, professors, philistines and donkeys” (p. 69). One is here reminded also of Lewis Carroll’s Hunting of the Snark: “They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care/They pursued it with forks and hope.” (Fit the fifth, “The Beaver’s Lesson.”)

20. “(Id accidet) si quam maxime notatas similitudines constituemus; si non multas nec vagas, sed aliquid agentes imaginis ponimus; si egregiam pulchritudinem aut unicum turpitudinem eis attribuemus; si aliquid exornabimus, ut si coronis aut veste purpurea, quo nobis notatior sit similitudo; aut si cruentam aut aceno oblitem aut rubrica delibatum inducamus, quo magis insigna sit forma, aut ridiculas res aliquas imaginibus attribuamus, nam ea res quoque faciet ut facilius meminisse valeamus.” Rhetorica ad Herennium, XXII, 37, p. 221.

23. Freud, p. 44.
25. Freud, p. 130.
27. “[Ponas] unum Petrum quem tu cognoscas; qui sit tuus amicus vel inimicus; cum quo tu habuisti aliquem familiaritatem, qui sedeat vel faciat in illo loco aliquid ridiculum vel inusitatum, et similiter dicat. Verbi gratia quod ibi sit unus petrus in loco primo qui interficiat unum hominem quem tu cognoscis; vel quod unus minetur sibi evaginato gladio; vel quod comedat vel bibat de inusitatibus rebus.” Ars memoriae, Ms. 1436, Biblioteca Civica, Lucca, Italy.

28. Pietro de Ravenna, Phoenix, Venice, 1491, ff. 88v-89r.
30. “Ut si unus Johannes staret in una taberna, vel mingeret aut ostenderet pudibunda sua.” Ms. 1436, Bib. civ., Lucca.
31. “E dapresso diremo dell’altro cioe ghallo chino di bolla becha metteremo un ghallo chinato che bechi le bolle adalchuno uomo e metterollo in quello luogo dove vorra ...” Ms. 1565, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Florence, Italy.
33. Freud, p. 143.
35. Freud, p. 151.
38. Freud, p. 172.
39. E. Kris, “A Psychotic Artist of the Middle-ages,” in *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, 1952. Though we do not subscribe to Kris’ medicalization of the work of Opicinus, and to judgments which probably attribute to individual illness practices in fact associated with memory techniques, there is no doubt that the practice of the art of memory, in its use of figures and affects, lends itself to the expression of pathologic traits, and maybe leads to their reinforcement.