

Carruthers, Mary. "Inventional Mnemonics and the Ornaments of Style: The Case of Etymology." Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate, 2.2 (1992): 103-114.

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1

Following on her recent volume, The Book of Memory, the orientations provided by Professor Carruthers in her article "Inventional Mnemonics and the Ornaments of Style: The Case of Etymology," Connotations 2.2 (1992):103-114, are indispensable for our understanding of the terms and the practice of memory from antiquity through the Renaissance and even beyond. Here I propose merely to add some comment in the hope of suggesting some further depths underlying the cultural and psychological issues which she discusses.

Carruthers is centrally concerned with the "false" etymologies advanced in "inventional mnemonics" in which "semantics is banished in favor of sounds" (104-105). She gives the example of Jacopo de Voragine's interpretation of the name "Cecilia" as sounding like (quasi = "sort of," or "like, as it were") various Latin words or word combinations. These include caeca (blind) + lilia (lilies) or Lya (Leah, Jacob's wife, Gen. 29 ff.), and caeci (of a blind person) + via (way), and so on. Cecilia is connected with such terms and concepts because of its sound. These associations are "false" in the view of present-day historical study of etymology, for they do not portray at all the way in which the term Cecilia in fact evolved as shown by documentary historical linguistics. The historical roots of lilia or via or caelum have nothing to do with the name Cecilia, although caecus in fact does, for in recorded history Cecilia does lead back to the name of the Roman gens Caecilius, which itself derives from the Latin caecus, blind.

Carruthers refers to the "false" etymologies which are distinctive of Jacopo's and much other medieval "inventional mnemonics" as "elaborately punning riffs of memory" (105). The reference to "riffs" here is extraordinarily deft and teasing. It warrants further exploration.

Riff refers to a phrase in a musical composition which is repeated over and over (ostinato) and which typically supports a solo improvisation. The riff is normally a part of the written musical score, but of course the improvisation is not written into the score but freely generated simply as sound on one or another musical instrument--for example, a trumpet--as the riff read off the musical score is being played. The improvisation relates to the score in that it has some reference to the sounds produced by those musicians following the fixed musical text of the composer, but it comes into being spontaneously, an event occasioned by but not shaped by the riff in the score itself. (In her use of the term riff, Carruthers may well intend to include the improvisation rather than to refer simply to the riff in this strict sense of something in the composer's score, but no matter, for the rifting phenomenon which forms part of a given composition invites and thus does involve improvisation, so that the compositor's score and the volunteered improvisation go to-

gether).

The improvisation of course occurs only when the score is played. Not from any score as such but from the sounded music produced in accordance with the visual score, the improvisation is generated simply as an improvised sound event. The same musician hearing the same riff when the music is being played at another time might well do another improvisation, not at all the same as the first. Like the first, this improvisation would relate to the sounded music, only differently. Of course, after an improvisation invited by the riff is played, it can itself be transcribed into the score or text, but then it is no longer an improvisation but an expansion of the score which others following the now augmented score will use as they use the rest of the score or text.

Similarly, as musical improvisations are sounds which relate to the sounded score but do not come out of the score as the rest of the musical work does, so the sound "etymologies" which are occasioned by Cecilia or other terms which correspond to riffs in the scored music, relate to the texts in which the name Cecilia is preserved but do not come out of any current or previous textual record or prescription. They occur not because of textual marks, which of themselves are silent, but come about when these are actually read, that is, put into sounds. The "false" etymologies adverted to by Carruthers arise simply because "the syllables of her name sound like those words" (105). They are take-offs on the sound of the name, not of the way it is written, just as musical improvisations are take-offs on the sounded riff--the text as played--that invites them. Similarities of sound can touch off all sorts of sound connections--in the case of the name "Cecilia" or other terms, different for different improvisors and/or occasions.

To scholars who study etymologies under the control of texts, to regard such improvisations as "etymologies" is a scandal. They concern only sound coming out of sound. Attending to such a phenomenon only downgrades the careful historical study grounded in texts and thus projects "etymologies" which are indeed "false" in the sense that they stand apart from the scripted records. However, although here you have only sound coming out of sound (prescribed by the written text, but registered as heard, not as seen). To the improvisor and his/her hearers, such "etymologies" may be exquisitely relevant to aural perception, and thus to the hearers' actual world, though quite external to scripted history.

The stark contrast between these sound "etymologies" and historical etymologies worked out by literates advertises the differential between two worlds: (1) the world of "primary orality," the original world of Homo sapiens and of all words after the species first appeared some 150,000 years ago, a world with no sense of even the possibility of writing or of recorded verbalized history, and (2) the world of literacy or the textual world, which began only some 5000 to 6000 years ago in isolated places beginning in the Near East and only after thousands of

years impacted large sections of the earth's surface. In this textual world, in which sounds are processed visually, historical verbalized records can be permanently accumulated. Like all science, scientific etymology, the etymology of those who find "false" etymology in instances such as those adverted to by Carruthers, is impossible without writing, which can record dated instances of particular terms and meanings. Mnemonic etymology or "inventional memory" on the other hand, which Carruthers calls attention to, is quite possible without writing and probably is inevitable in the absence of writing, although it does persist as part of the "oral residue" which is very high in early textual cultures. Orality, even in residue, fosters improvisation. To this day, compared to writing, our oral utterances or ordinary "talk" are predominantly improvisation and invite further improvisational responses from others who hear them.

Sound is of the present. The same is true of sounded words. Each sounded word exists only when it is going out of existence. In saying "existence," by the time I get to the "-tence." the "exis-" is gone--and has to be, or I cannot be understood.

Writing does not simply wipe out the old world of orality but interacts with it. Writing cultures still use oral discourse--perhaps even more than oral cultures, for writing cultures have more to speak about. Like an oral culture, in its speech a writing culture engages the present directly, However, its textuality never does. All texts, musical and other, always come out of the past (including memoranda one may have written to oneself sixty seconds ago). Texts are not sound, although they may call for sounding. Texts are physical objects produced by writing technologies. Texts abide. Heard sound is not a physical object nor does it abide. Created in the present, sound is of itself faced to the present and the oncoming future rather than to the past. Throughout the animal kingdom sound is often used not only to indicate a present state of affairs but also to alert individuals or groups to the future, signaling them to take action in the face of a coming danger. It appears quite unlikely that the sounded cries of infrahuman animals ever call up the past as the human oral storyteller can do and as all texts inevitably do. Human beings are distinguished from other animals by having a conscious reflective relationship to the past.

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After Homo sapiens has been on earth some 150,000 years (Stringer), and after writing was finally developed (stumbled into, might be more accurate: see Schmandt-Besserat) some 6000 to 5000 years ago, cultures with writing retain what I have called a high residual orality (Presence 79-92). Only gradually does residual orality diminish, and of course it never entirely disappears. Highly literate persons still use distinctively oral memory, for example, in daily life. But much less than did their ancestors, and their use of oral memory is styled by their habit of writing (they think of memorizing as listing--lists are an unknown in a primary oral culture. Generally speaking, residual

orality is greater the closer we come to the origins of writing. Thus, although far more textual than antiquity, the Middle Ages has an almost incredibly higher residue of orality even in its writing (which is loaded with oral formulas and other memory devices) than we do today in our present chirographic and typographic (and now electronic) world. Hence the diffuse attention to memory in the Middle Ages and through the Renaissance and even beyond.

2 The riff, as explained above, among other things, conspicuously links the text and sound improvisation and thus helps us enter into the medieval (and much of the Renaissance) world. As sound, the improvisation invited by a riff looks to the present and future. This is in accord with Carruthers' insistence that "inventional" etymology of a given term as determined by "how you want to use it" (105), that is, by what you have in mind here and now or for the future, not by what the term connects with in etymological or other fixities as recorded in texts. The jazz musician who introduces a delightful improvisation is advertising not that this is part of the score before him or her, or that it ever occurred to anyone a moment before the present, but that it grows now on the soloist's own present terms out of the score as played here and now. To the fixed score of the riff before the musician's eyes, calling for an improvisation, the improvisation was a designed but future event and one unpredictable in its patterning. This improvised flow of sound is not where the textualized score, even as played here and now, actually was but where it could point--what its future could be--and now, thanks to the improvisation, where it actually does point. But the improvisation, even when it bursts into existence, does not declare itself a part of the fixed text, a part of the determined and recorded past. Like other sounded signals, it points to present and future (it might be occasion for a further improvisation. If the riff is played again, it should evoke not the same but a different improvisation. Improvisations are expected to come and go. So with Carruthers' instances of "inventional memory": they belong to no fixed text or textual history (although they, like musical improvisation, can subsequently be recorded in a text). They are realizations of imaginative possibilities which grow out of the present into the future. They are not records.

Much of this sound strange and even a bit balmy to present-day folk. Scholars today are wedded to the past. What is "true" about an utterance involves its past history. This makes sense, etymological and other. But it is not the only sense that can be made about an utterance. Another sense is what it promises when human beings return to it in a living present. In an oral culture the value of an oral poet is by no means simply what he or she has to say about the past, but what he or she can do with the past in present performance which will echo into the future.

the world of expressive sound simply as sound, without resort to representing it as text. We are textbound and have been through an awesome sequence of textualization movements in recent decades--the New Criticism, structuralism, deconstruction, and much more. And this despite the fact that modern linguistics has long stressed the historically fundamental orality of language.

The "etymologies" Carruthers attends to are one of the regular mixed phenomena--indirectly textually based, but radically oral--found in abundance in textual cultures with a high residue of orality. They may help improve our feeling for the total realities of language.

In connection with the common disdain for "inventional" etymologies or mnemonics, we are reminded that the stranglehold which textuality has had on language into our own day in the West had been rooted historically in the earlier dominance of Learned Latin. For in antiquity and the early Middle Ages Latin was, in effect, the only language in all of Western Europe that could be put into writing. For the most part, all the hundreds of other European languages were only "winged words," flying away as they were uttered. No one ever wrote them, and most of the ways of using language in medieval Europe have simply disappeared, for they were never written down. Divorced from ordinary familial and social life, for some 1300 years Learned Latin survived only as a sex-oriented male language, ruled not by its own living sound but by a hierarchy of alphabetization with which it had been invested. Latin was a first language for absolutely none of its millions of users from around AD 700 to the present and was used by absolutely no one who could not write it. Learned (i.e. no-longer-vernacular) Latin was a language with no direct infantile unconscious-to-conscious pattern of development such as full human languages all have. Learned Latin had no baby-talk to grow out of but was simply textually imposed in totally adult form on young children in the course of schooling, which I have elsewhere styled a "puberty rite" for young males--like all puberty rites, not incidentally but regularly and, in effect, always involving physical punishment which makes sure the initiates are tough enough for adulthood. This artificially contrived state of Latin as a radically and basically textual phenomenon established a textual bind throughout Western culture stronger than could ever exist for a first language learned from talk first and then put into texts, as normally all written languages are learned today (except artificial constructs such as Esperanto).

There were parallels to the chirographically controlled male language of Latin in other parts of the world in Classical Chinese, Sanskrit, Classical Arabic, and Rabbinical Hebrew--all equally sex-linked (male), secondary languages learned after one's first language and learned under total chirographic control. (Learned Latin developed no new words out of the way Latin words sounded but only out of the way they were spelt. The romance languages that grew out of nonchirographic, oral Latin, like other languages of past and present, developed new words from the ways older words had sounded.)

Out of textbound classicism came study of records and construction of etymologies built on records. The beginnings of linguistics trace to the study of classical Latin, with classical Greek and Hebrew, not to the study of any vernaculars. Linguistics was in its origins text-bound, just as hermeneutics was.

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From what has just been reviewed, it can be seen that once Learned Latin was decentered in the curriculum because of the gradual emergence of Western vernaculars (Latinate or Romance and other, such as Germanic, Slavic, Finno-Ugric, etc.) as subjects of study at the "learned" or university level), the following phenomena, among others, can be observed in neat succession. They do not describe all there has been in major recent, often very rich and fruitful, developments in literary and linguistic and philosophical and cultural history and theory, but they describe some central patterns in the developments.

(1) The New Criticism came into being in the English-speaking world. The New Criticism arose just after, at the turn of the still barely present century, vernacular English had become part of the regular university-level curriculum. The battle-cry of the New Criticism was "Stay with the text"--that is, with the now vernacular text. The unacknowledged reason for the intensity of this prescription: the mother tongue now being studied, built from infancy on an oral base, had potentials, even in its texts, missing from the textbound Learned Latin that academia had previously been concerned with. You can mine a lot more out of the unconscious and other hidden psychological richness in texts in your first language than anyone ever could out of a text of Learned Latin, which had no connection with growth of a first oral language in infancy in close association with the unconscious, without reflective knowledge of any conscious grammatical "rules," and which consequently had to develop a criticism based on data externally and laboriously acquired, largely from outside any particular work itself under consideration. Thus, although there was a New Criticism, there had been no "Old Criticism." "Old Criticisms" was simply classical language and literature study. Learned Latin was sustained by text and by consciously applied rules. In it new words were--and still are--made up, but, as earlier noted, never out of the way the language sounded, only out of the way it was or is spelled and written. Hence the dependence of virtually all academic study before the New Criticism on a laboriously acquired textual philology and the prolonged stand of philology as the last bastion of the earlier, script-based, study which alone was possible in Learned Latin. Philology was still smothering other, more belletristic treatments of literature into the 1920s. This is what the New Criticism set itself against, but which it also curiously perpetuated by its concentration on the text, as against the free-wheeling oral economy of languages which had their living roots in the orality tracing back to early childhood.

(2) Structuralism. Language is treated by analogy with

visual and tactile "structures"--texts are definitely objects, technologically produced, for they can be felt as well as seen. With the advent of the vernaculars, texts are still attended to in principle as primary, although in the last analysis they are in the vernaculars subservient to talk.

(3) Deconstruction. Saturated by the textual preoccupations which Learned Latin had so long enforced in the Western psyche, the sensibility was still too fixated on texts to consider that all texts are always modifications of preexistent nontextual settings, that they always grow out of the nontextual--people and gestures and cultures and even physical environment. To relieve the frustrating feeling (largely unconscious) of total textual envelopment which was the heritage of some twelve centuries of Latin-dominated study, options included:

(a) radically disempowering the text by making it always inconclusive (this it always had been anyhow, but adverting to the fact had not appeared urgent) or

(b) totally empowering the text by making its dominance incontestable even before there were any texts by positing "pre-writing" as a prerequisite for language for Homo sapiens, a species on earth since some 150,000 years ago but possessing writing only for the past 5000-6000 years ago, and then only among a tiny fraction of the members of the species.

(c) Both empowering the text and disempowering it at the same time. This has been the option most common today.

(4) "Virtual reality." This is the present-day maximizing of textuality made possible with the computer. The text enforces itself even in the nontextual, calling for the donning electronic hoods to envelope the head and electronic, "feely" gloves, worn to "virtually" contact the "virtual" computerized world on its own terms).

What next? Who knows? The past is prelude.

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