



The *ars memorativa* and *ecphrasis*: Technical and exhortative descriptions to construct the great theatre of memory

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Abstract

The highly suggestive but also emblematic relationship between the art of memory and rhetorical ecphrasis has often been noted and investigated since the earliest studies devoted to *ars memorativa*. Indeed, the so-called *imagines agentes* require strong psychic representations capable of strongly mobilizing the passions of the memory artist, effects comparable to those that are provoked by ecphrastic descriptions (*enargeia*). However, there are few studies that deal in depth with *loci memoriae* from the perspective of ecphrasis. So this contribution aims to reconsider the relationship between the art of memory and ekphrasis through the rereading of a series of early modern mnemonic treatises focusing especially on their peculiar ways of illustrating the composition of architectural mental places, described in a clear, detailed and effective way so that readers can compose them by oneself. From such an approach I believe it is possible to thoroughly highlight the synergy of words, images and spaces. Main texts to be analyzed are chosen from mnemonic treatises that present compressed architectural mental places such as theaters, palaces, cities, gardens, including *Utriusque Cosmi, Maioris scilicet et Minoris* (...) by Robert Fludd, *Thesaurus artificiosae memoriae* by Cosma Rosselli, etc.

Keywords

Robert Fludd, Cosmas Rossellius, ekphrasis, enargeia, memory theatre

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Introduction: digression, ecfrasis and the art of memory

In the *Istitutio Oratoria*, Quintilian introduces the famous episode (“vulgata fabula”) on the birth of the *ars memorativa* when he discusses the capacity of memory indispensable to the ideal orator.¹ In particular, he recounts how the Greek poet Simonides, during a banquet at the home of a wealthy nobleman who was his patron, was invited to compose a *carmen* to celebrate him. However, contrary to the prearranged agreement, he was refused part of the fee because he had praised Castor and Pollux in a digression (“degressus in laudes Castoris ac Pollucis exierat”). As is known, this ‘digression’ saved his life.

The short but touching episode, inserted at the beginning of the argumentation, effectively summarises the arguments with which Quintilian illustrates the rules of mnemonics and explains how this *ars* works, based on place, order and images. By means of anecdote, the author summarises the essential parts of the mnemonic mechanism so that readers can prepare themselves to learn it. On the other hand, the description sounds ‘ecphrastic’ thanks to the use of vivid and singular images, capable of arousing strong emotions in the reader.

The combination of the history of invention and *ecphrasis* is reminiscent of a particular literary genre in the Greco-Roman tradition. These are the so-called ‘technical treatises’ teaching new sciences and engineering such as architecture, military strategies, hydraulics and medicine. From a certain point of view, the art of memory is nothing but a technique, or rather a multi-dimensional ‘mechanism’ composed of a series of detailed prescriptions.

Based on the new studies on *ecphrasis*, this short essay intends to ‘re-read’ mnemonic treatises, especially those published during early modern period in Europe, as a literary-collective *corpus* characterised by a particular way of transmitting practical-theoretical knowledge. Such a perspective makes it possible to highlight an as yet unexplored relationship between texts, images and virtual spaces in the *ars memorativa*.

Is it only imagines agentes? The art of memory and the various types of ecphrasis

Since the beginning of modern research on Renaissance mnemonics, the relationship between the *ars* and *ecphrasis* has been repeatedly emphasised. Fundamental appears to be the concept of *enargeia*² according to which images can be vividly represented in the mind, so that they become visible to the eyes of the reader or listener even in their absence.³ The more intense and moving the mental figures are, the more effective the mnemonic system will be.

¹ Quintilianus, *Istitutio oratoria*, 11.2.11-13; See also Cicero, *De oratore*, 2.86.352-354.

² Quintilianus, *Istitutio oratoria*, 6.2.31-32.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.2.29.

Most previous studies have focused on the analysis of *imagines agentes*.⁴ However, the suggestive results of recent studies devoted to *ecphrasis* invite us to reconsider the relationship between description and mnemonics.⁵ It should not be forgotten that the latter is composed of *loci* and *imagines*, and sometimes the two elements are so symbiotically united that they cannot be separated distinctly.

Already in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, written between 86 and 82 B.C., the anonymous author of ancient Rome advised his readers to place marks at each *locus*: the representation of a hand for the fifth *locus*, that of a person called *Decimus* for the tenth *locus*.⁶ Basing themselves on classical authority, some 16th-17th-century treatise writers argued that mental *locus* should not be left empty;⁷ instead, it is necessary to differentiate them by means of eye-catching signs or images, such as frescos, notable objects, or, in some cases, even human figures. For example, in the *Arte del ricordare* (1583) Giovan Battista Della Porta, when introducing the inhabitants of the *loci*, emphasises how they are only activated when the practitioners of the *ars* mentally wander through the mnemonic *loci*.⁸

The interpenetration between *imagines agentes* and mental places occurs in highly original architectural contexts. In mnemonic treatises, these descriptions appear ‘ecphrastic’, thus blurring the boundary between *imagines agentes* and *loci*. These are the so-called ‘invented’ or ‘fantastic’ places, suggested by some Renaissance authors despite the tenacious opposition of traditionalists against the excesses of imagination; a large group of theorists actually prefer *loci* based on real buildings. From a certain point of view, therefore, the memory artist is nothing other than an architect, since the act of constructing mental places so sought after belongs to the *res aedificatoria*. This comparison between architecture and mnemonics opens up a path that has not yet been trodden in our research.

⁴ On the relationship between ecphrasis and mnemonics see: Ernst, “Ars memorativa und Ars poetica in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit”, 73-100; Bolzoni, “L’art de la mémoire et le travail de l’oubli”, 145-157; Donia, “‘Ut pictura lingua’: ecfraisi e memoria nelle pagine di Vincenzo Borghini”, 307-355.

⁵ We limit ourselves in general to: Webb, *Ecphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*; Norton, *Aspects of Ecphrastic Technique in Ovid’s Metamorphoses*; Elet, *Architectural Invention in Renaissance Rome*; Koopman, *Ancient Greek Ecphrasi*; Panagiotidou, *The Poetics of Ecphrasis*.

⁶ *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, III, 31.

⁷ For example, the leading memory theorists of the 16th century such as Pietro da Ravenna, Lodovico Dolce and Filippo Gesualdo. For bibliographic information on their work, see the footnotes below.

⁸ Della Porta, *Ars reminiscendi*, 68-70.

Corpus mnemonicus: *technical manuals to illustrate how to construct mental places*

Treatises on memory are special texts: they not only describe the system, which functions like a machine, but also require readers to reproduce this mechanism mentally in order to achieve the desired goal. In other words, manuals of the *ars* invite ‘active’ reading on the part of their readers. In this regard, the sections devoted to the fabrication of complicated mnemonic *loci* are of considerable interest. Here, readers learn how to construct the mental edifices to house the *imagines agentes*. It is appropriate to apply to such texts the concept of ‘technical ecphrasis’ theorised by Courtney Ann Roby, in order to highlight the characteristics of ancient manuals dedicated to certain types of ‘artefacts’ such as buildings, military machines and aqueducts.⁹

According to Courtney Ann Roby, in addition to the actual *ecphrasis*, i.e. those devoted to the representation of any given artefact and the instructions for making it, there are also peripheral descriptions that can be called *parecphrasis*, since they serve to place the described objects in the broad cultural context in order to make it easier for less experienced readers to understand.¹⁰ Examples cited include the history of the invention of a given artefact, the lives of previous inventors, historical episodes concerning the artefact in question, the personal experience of the author, the reaction of those who saw the artefact, etc.

These literary characteristics can also be found in numerous treatises on the art of memory printed between Humanism and the Renaissance. If a single treatise is not able to elaborate all the necessary precepts, it is instead possible to consider the set of printed texts on mnemonics as a collective *corpus*. In the ecphrasistic descriptions that illustrate place-based prescriptions, there also appear a series of *historiae* that belong to the domain of *parecphrasis*. These not only facilitate the understanding of those who intend to learn the *ars*, but also provoke the involvement of readers. Before turning to the analysis of texts that propose instructions on how to construct refined architectural *loci*, let us therefore take a brief look at the aforementioned literary inventions.

History of invention

The well-known legend of Simonides, considered as the inventor of the *ars memorandi*, forms the essential part of most treatises, such as Ludovico Dolce’s *Dialogo del modo di accrescere e conservar la memoria* (1562),¹¹ Della Porta’s *Arte del ricordare*,¹² Filippo Gesualdo’s *Plutosofia* (1592),¹³ and Lambertus Schenkelius’s *Gazophylacium artis memoriae*

⁹ Roby, *Technical Ecphrasis in Greek and Roman Science and Literature*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 104, 128-150.

¹¹ Dolce, *Dialogo del modo di accrescere e conservar la memoria*, 13.

¹² Della Porta, *Ars reminiscendi* aggiunta *L’arte del ricordare*, 61.

¹³ Gesualdo, *Plutosofia*, f. 11r.

(1610).¹⁴ Of these works, Dolce's prescriptions are nothing more than a faithful translation into Italian of the Ciceronian version of the episode (*De oratore*, 2.86.352-354), while those proposed by Schenkelius copy the account reported by Quintilian almost verbatim.

The wonderful results obtainable from *ars*

It is through the words that explain who the *ars* is supposed to serve that one can infer who the treatises are intended for. To cite one example, the Florentine Dominican Agostino Del Riccio, at the beginning of his manuscript *Arte della memoria locale* (1595), inserts a dedication entitled "Alla gioventù fiorentina studiosa di Lettere",¹⁵ while numerous treatise writers list various professions, that of orator, theologian, philosopher, jurist, doctor, merchant, student and professor of the liberal arts and sciences. The authors highlight the remarkable results of learning these rules. We will limit ourselves here to quoting the words of the Florentine Dominican Cosmas Rossellius, according to whom, thanks to the miraculous power of mnemonics "movetur immobilis, mortua reviviscit", one can recall the past as if it had been written in letters or sculpted in marble ("tamquam literis exarata, vel in marmore sculpta").¹⁶ It would be suggestive to imagine that the Dominican conceived such a metaphor inspired by the sculptural masterpieces found almost everywhere in his hometown.

Lives of the illustrious masters of memory

Biographies of famous men of exceptional ability of memory also form an important part of the *historiae* of the *corpus*. Based on the popular literary genre of the time, such as eulogies of illustrious men,¹⁷ historical figures such as Simonides, Metrodorus, Themistocles, Plato, Cicero, Caesar, Seneca, Hieronymus, St. Thomas Aquinas, Petrarch, Pico della Mirandola, etc. appear.¹⁸ Of interest for our discussion is the fact that modern treatise writers are also mentioned in these lists: Peter of Ravenna, Romberch, Della Porta, Dolce, Rossellius.¹⁹ This provides consistency and shows how a literary genre develops from the results of previous works.

Recounting personal experiences

A host of authors choose the first person to report their personal experience and offer a 'model' to imitate. Among autobiographical narratives, the wanderings in search of the

¹⁴ Schenkelius, *Gazophylacium artis memoriae*, 8-10, 273, 342.

¹⁵ Del Riccio, *Arte della memora locale*, f. 1.

¹⁶ "Epistola ad Candidum Lectorem". In Rossellius, *Thesaurus artificiosae memoriae*.

¹⁷ Giovio, *Elogi degli uomini illustri*. See also: Id., *Scritti d'arte*,

¹⁸ For the complete catalogue of this kind, see: Schenkelius, *Gazophylacium*, 10- 38. On Petrarch master of memory see Torre, *Petrarcheschi segni di memoria*.

¹⁹ Schenkelius, *Gazophylacium*, 29; Gesualdo, *Plutosofia*, f. 10v.

secret of the *ars* constitute a *topos* capable of increasing the authority of the treatise writer and engaging the readers.

The most famous example of this ‘self-mythologizing’ is that of Pietro da Ravenna, founder of the literary mnemonic genre. In his best-selling booklet *Phoenix seu artificiosa memoria* (1491), in the opening part of the work (*Conclusio* I), the Italian jurist recounts how he, in his youth, had always wanted to be above any learned man, in the sphere of any discipline. This fury, as he calls it, drove him to compile more than a hundred thousand mental places inspired by the various cities he visited while wandering through the peninsula.²⁰ In the following pages (*Conclusio* III) he reveals the *secretum utilissimum* he discovered during his long wanderings: putting images of beautiful maidens in mental *loci*, since memory is influenced by the location of the girls, whose ‘beauty’, ‘charm’, Pietro da Ravenna emphasizes.²¹

As mentioned above, such ‘inhabitants’ in the *loci* act as catalysts that stimulate the fusion of *imagines agentes* and mental places.

Let us now move on to the analysis of *ecphrasis* that teach how to build places and realistic architectural scenographies, populated by well-characterised fantastic characters.

The various ways of presenting loci

To explain how to accurately and effectively picture *loci* in the mind, the authors offer a wide range of rhetorical techniques. The impersonal form and the third person can induce a certain feeling of distance, arousing greater authority in the writer, to the detriment of the familiarity that might be installed with readers. The first-person singular contributes, according to Courtney Ann Roby, to producing a “‘lived-in’ space of construction”, in which authors set a good example,²² while in order to directly involve readers and exhort them to put into practice what they have read, authors resort to the imperative or the second-person form or the hortatory first-person plural subjunctive.²³ We should also not forget the central role played by the illustrations created through woodcuts or etchings, as they collaborate intimately to steer the readers’ imagination in a certain direction. Again, it seems appropriate to compare these rhetorical techniques with those offered by ancient technical treatises as they share common characteristics: both attempt to produce vivid mental images by means of detailed descriptions of con-

²⁰ I consulted the following edition: Tommai, *Phoenix seu artificiosa memoria*, sig. B 4r.

²¹ “Secretum ergo habe utilissimum in artificiosa memoria, quod diu tacui ex pudore. Si cio meminisse cupis, virgines pulcherrimas colloca: memoria enim collocatione puellarum mirabiliter commovetur”: *ibid.*, sig. C 1r.

²² Roby, *Technical Ecphrasis*, 204.

²³ In this regard, see Elet, *Architectural Invention*, in which the remarkably interesting concept of “hortatory ecphrasis” is proposed.

crete artefacts.²⁴ Bearing in mind the aforementioned literary characteristics, we will continue by analysing some examples.

Most treatises propose *loci* according to a ‘standard model’: scale and measurements are ‘relative’ elements as they allow more flexibility in case the reader wants to make changes. Descriptions focus mainly on abstract theories, general principles, generic shapes of rooms, houses, buildings. This tendency also belongs to certain technical texts, especially works from the Hellenistic period, which deal with automata, gnomons or similar constructions.²⁵

Among the mnemonic treatise writers mentioned so far, Gesualdo and Schenkelius present interesting examples. In the *Plutosofia*, Gesualdo proposes the idea of the “Libreria della Memoria”.²⁶ Effectively using verbs of the subjunctive mode, the author exhorts the reader to fabricate in the mind large cities composed of a series of *loci*, in the form of palaces, to each of which a discipline is assigned.²⁷ As already mentioned, the size of the city and the individual palaces, the shapes, the colours, the ornaments, are left to the free choice of the “formatore”.

Some similar, perhaps even more refined *loci* are elaborated in *Gazophylacium artis memoriae*. Using one of the buildings that make up the great city-*locus*, the author offers the image of a skyscraper of memory, whose floors reach up to 100. Each floor can comprise multiple rooms, from 20 up to 600, depending on the amount of information to be remembered.²⁸ Without any indication of the concrete shape of the buildings or the ornaments, the descriptions appear as a ‘standard model’ to be modified at will.

On the other hand, these two examples represent the so-called ‘imaginary’ *loci*, the creation and subsequent development of which was made possible by the authority of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. The anonymous author suggests creating imaginary *loci*, if not making do with the mental places already available.²⁹ With the rediscovery of the *ars* in the late 15th century and its gradual revival in the 16th century, it became possible

²⁴ Roby, *Technical Ecphrasis*, Chap. 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁶ Gesualdo, *Plutosofia*, ff. 55r-58v.

²⁷ “il formatore (...) giornalmente collochi il tutto nelli formati Luoghi (...)” (56v), “il formatore di questa Libreria vi ponga Quadri di Santi, eleggendosi un certo numero di Precipi del Paradiso, Angeli, & Humani, (...)” (57r), “Dirimpetto a questi orienti e lumi debbe il formatore drizzar la sua Libreria” (*ibid.*).

²⁸ “Liceret etiam domum quandam accipere, in cuius lateribus 100 essent cubicula & in tota 400. deinde in primo tabulato 20, 40, 60, 80, aut 600 sumere cubicula, totidem in 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 & c. usque ad 100. aut ultra, ac tum una domus sufficeret pro omnibus necessariis”: Schenkelius, *Gazophylacium*, 117.

²⁹ “Quare licebit, si hac prompta copia contenti non erimus, nosmet ipsos nobis cogitatione nostra regionem constituere, et idoneorum locorum commodissimam distinctionem conparare”: *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, III. 32. Quintilianus also briefly mentions the possibility of inventing *loci*: “Etiam fingere sibi has imaines licet”: Quintilianus, *Istitutio oratora*, 11. 2. 21.

to create some unforgettable *loci* to visualise in the mind through the expressive power of *ecphrasis*.

The Memory of Inferno by Cosmas Rossellius

Among the countless treatises published in the 16th century, some lacking particularly original elements, the *Thesaurus artificiosae memoriae* (1579) by the Dominican friar Cosma Rossellius stands out.³⁰ In the text, he shows remarkable singularity in devising splendid cosmological *loci* inspired by Dante's journey. Starting from Inferno, the friar presents the *mundus mnemonicus* through elementary and celestial worlds, all the way to Paradise. Instead of a simple explanation on how to make *loci*, this section of the work constitutes a kind of travel 'diary'. The literary technique used is reminiscent of Frontinus' *De aquaeductu urbis* (1st century BC), a typical treatise in which the author follows the course of the aqueducts to illustrate Rome's water system.

It is also interesting to note the 'interchangeability' between *loci* and *imagines agentes*: in this mnemonic system, everything can become both image and place.³¹ This is therefore a peculiar example of the aforementioned interpenetration between *imagines* and mental places.

Here we will focus only on the analysis of Rosselli's Inferno, as it represents the essential part of the work. After explaining the definition of the *loci* and their hierarchical structure (1v-2v), the author moves on to describe a series of *loci communi amplissimi*, the largest category of the mnemonic system, of which the Inferno is the starting point. The descriptions are divided into the following categories:

- I. A summarised explanation of the general structure of Inferno. (2v-6r)
- II. The importance of illustrations (7r-v)
- III. Theological arguments on Inferno and further explanations on the damned placed here. (7v-11v)
- IV. The illustration (woodcut) of the entire infernal *locus*. (12r)
- V. A Carmine summarising in rhyme the composition of the *locus*. (13r-15r)

What characterises the description of the infernal *loci* is thus the complementarity of text and image. Although the illustration (Fig. 1) only appears in Part IV (12r), the author most probably intended to include it already in Part II, after having justified the use of physical images. Or at least he had the intention of having the readers observe the image on the

³⁰ On this work see: Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 121-129; Keller-Dall'Asta, *Heilsplan und Gedächtnis*, 149-184; Kuwakino, *L'architetto sapiente*, 243-284.

³¹ "Nec mireris, quod eadem res, quae pro locis serviunt in uno et eodem discursu minime alterato, ac in eodem tempore, etiam pro figuris deserviant. in consimilibus enim discursibus easdem res et figuras esse et loca non dedecet": Rossellius, *Thesaurus*, f. 78r.

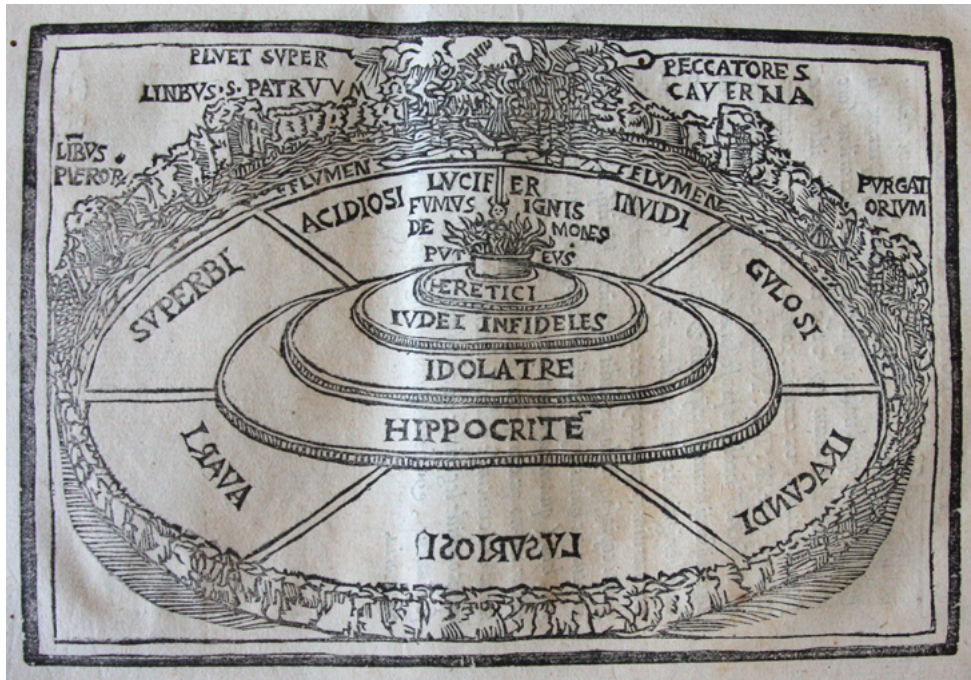


Fig. 1 – Inferno (Cosmas Rossellius, *Thesaurus artificiosae memoriae*, Venice, Antonio Padovani 1579, 12r).

following page. The subsequent, very detailed descriptions (III) in fact assume that readers have already memorised the image depicted in the woodcut. In other words, the ecphrastic texts do not simply constitute reproductions of the physical illustrations, but instruct on how to observe and interpret the image printed on paper. The same arguments can be found in the parts devoted to the *locus* of Paradise (29v-37r), in which the same illustration (Fig. 2) is inserted twice, after the generic explanation of the place (37v) and at the end of the additional descriptions, designed to explain the less clear parts of the figure (51r).

The creation of unique *loci* is possible thanks to the synergy between texts and illustrations. These *loci* are defined as ‘complete structures’ because they cannot be arbitrarily modified: size, shape, ornaments and inhabitants appear as fixed elements. Recall that this type of descriptive strategy is mainly adopted by ancient Roman treatise writers such as Vitruvius (odometer) and Varro (aviary).³²

Let us move on to an analysis of the manner in which the author urges readers to construct original mnemonic *loci*.

³² Vitruvius, *De architectura*, 10.9; Varro, *De re rustica*, III.v. See Roby, *Technical Ecphrasis*, 87, 109.

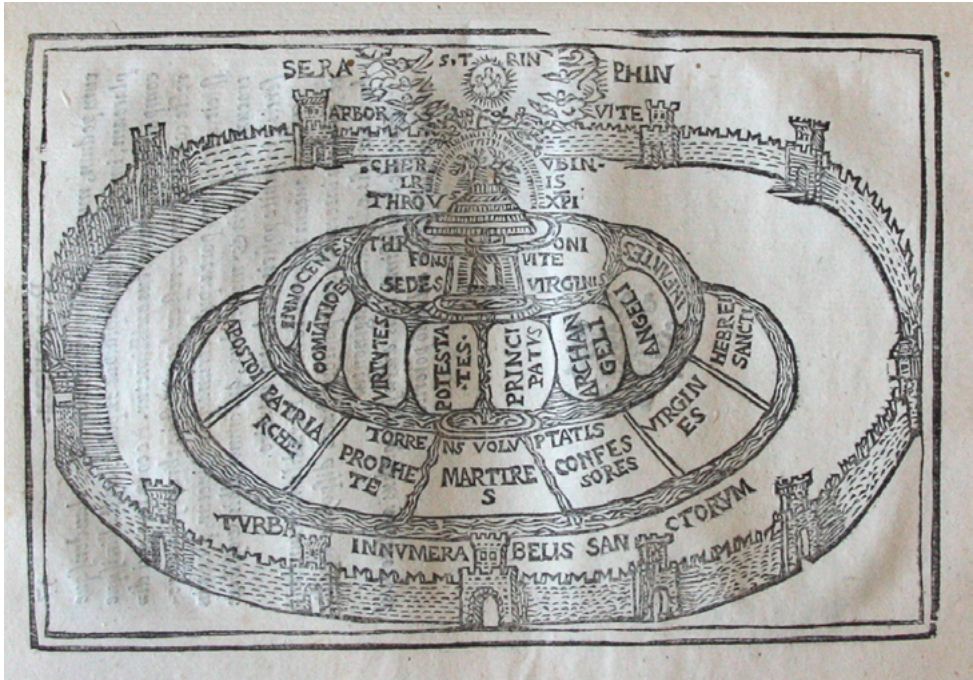


Fig. 2 – Paradise, Cosmas Rossellius, *Thesaurus artificiosae memoriae*, Venice, Antonio Padovani 1579, 37v).

The ‘technical’ ecphrasis and the infernal mundus

Below we would like to analyse the relationship between ecphrastic texts, mnemonic *loci* and illustrations in the order in which they are treated.

(I) Elementary structure of *loci*

After dividing the Inferno into eleven *gironi* (subdivisiones), Rossellius begins the description of the *locus* infernale from the single *girone*. In the centre of the structure he locates a well (“puteus [...] existimetur”). Starting from it, the Dominican’s narrative develops centrifugally towards the periphery. Around the well extend four concentric circles that overlap to form a staircase, to which are added (“adjicimus”) the other seven, thus obtaining the eleven subdivisions. Subjunctive mode verbs and the first-person plural are used effectively, the former to exhort readers, the latter to produce a collaborative space.

After a brief digression on the authority of the Bible and the infernal punishments, the Dominican resumes his description of the entire infernal *locus*, but this time using the subjunctive verbs in a more precise and detailed manner, as if attempting to paint

a picture from a series of previously drawn sketches. In other words, even before observing the physical illustration, the author tries to paint the exact mental image of the infernal *locus*.

It is here that he reveals how the infernal world is circular and gloomy. Within the eleven *gironi* appear for the first time the ‘inhabitants’, i.e. the damned and the demon-guards, who are introduced to differentiate the otherwise too homogeneous geometric *loci*. The measurements of each *girone* are indicated by precise numbers. The four stone (“lapideos”) *gironi*, circling the central well, are each 3 or 4 *braccia* wide and about 2 *braccia* high. In the first circle are (“sint”) the heretics who tear up *the Holy Scriptures*, while in the second are (“sint”) the Jews with iron faces, veiled eyes, and lowered napes. At the third are imagined (“imagentur”) the idolaters with their idols destroyed while at the fourth are placed (“ponantur”) the hypocrites. Out of the well comes the fiery torrent where the hideous figure of Lucifer appears (“appareat”).

With regard to the seven areas surrounding the central steps, the Dominican indicates that the walls separating each part are one *braccio* width, the height is 3 or 4 *palmae*, while the walls forming the outer circumference are 3 *palmae* high. The author uses the expression “te oportet confingere”³³ which suggests how the Dominican hopes that readers will construct the *loci* in the same manner as they are described.³⁴

Within the seven sections appear the seven deadly sins represented by the figures of the damned and demons.

(II) Illustration as a vehicle linking texts to the mind

After explaining the general composition of the *loci*, the Dominican inserts a brief yet significant annotation on the usefulness of the “picturae” (woodcuts) representing what is written on the *loci communi amplissimi* (Inferno, elemental and celestial worlds, Paradise).

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First of all, he emphasises how the ‘viewer’ can benefit greatly from this,³⁵ given the close link established between texts and images. The “inspector” should be the one who observes with the eyes of the psyche the mental *loci* outlined so far through words. The inherent power of the illustrations is so powerful and pleasing that it forces the readers’ minds to examine them closely.³⁶ The reason why there are some additions, deletions and changes in the illustrations compared to the descriptions lies precisely in the difference between the texts and the images, and the need to insert further explanations (“declara-

³³ Rossellius, *Thesaurus*, f. 6r.

³⁴ On this expression favoured by technical ecphrasis, see: Roby, *Technical Ecphrasis*, 109.

³⁵ “Inspectori maximo essent emolument”: Rossellius, *Thesaurus*, f. 7r.

³⁶ “illis conspicientium animus oblectaretur, ac hisce studiis operam navare, vel utili, vel voluptate, vel certe utroque permotus pene compellerentur”: *ibid.*

tionem”) to make clear what the “picturae” illustrate.³⁷ In other words, the Dominican first describes the *loci* with words, in a second moment he prepares the illustrations, and finally he puts the explanations again to comment on the painted images. The difference between the text before and after the illustration is subtle but notable, as in the former case the mind has to construct the image from scratch, whereas in the latter it starts from an existing visual basis and the *ecphrasis* goes on to complete the image.

(III) Ecphrasis to represent the *carcer apostatarum spirituum*

After emphasising the importance of the illustrations, short digressive descriptions follow in which the horrific visions of Inferno presented by the doctors of the Church are related. Listing the elements of torture such as thick smoke, red-hot flames, gnawing worms, screeching sounds, putrid stench, intolerable frost, etc., the Dominican defines Inferno as “the prison of apostate spirits”.³⁸ After contextualising the *loci* to be fabricated in the mind, the author exhorts readers to devise other tortures appropriate to the faults of each condemned person themselves.³⁹ The sentence that closes this part is very suggestive:

Idcirco qualibet hac in pictura data poena, damnatis quaedam singulis, sed longe maior erit excogitanda.⁴⁰

The rough translation sounds like: “Therefore, whatever punishment is given to the damned in this image, it must be imagined to be even more intense”. From these words it emerges how texts and illustrations are nothing more than the material with which to invent new and ever more effective *loci-imagines*.

The subsequent texts constitute a veritable ecphrastic ‘exegesis’ on paper illustration, instructing on how to develop initially crude paintings. If in part (I) the readers performed a simple act of placing the inhabitants within the architectural structure, in part (III) they must propose a grand synergistic theatre of Inferno, in which the ‘actors’ enact each individual punishment. Thus Lucifer, the only figure concretely depicted in the illustration (Fig. 3) represented in a primitive manner, must transform in the mind into the gruesome “prince of all demons” (“omnium daemonum principem”) enveloped in smoke and

³⁷ “Et, ut eorum omnium, quae depicta fuerunt, notitia plenior haberetur, omnium praedictorum declarationem, ibidem a latere apposimus : ut quae pictura includeret; scriptura declarentur”: *ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, f. 8r.

³⁹ “Nam cogita si potes omnia atrocissima tormenta, asperimasque poenas a mundo condito a diversis tyrannis hominibus inflictas etiam Christo domino, illas et omnes, quae humano inventu infligi possent, nec tamen parem ullam invenies, quae etiam minimae inferni poenae vel sensus, vel damni coaequari possit”: *ibid.*, f. 8v.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*



Fig. 3 – *Lucifer*, Cosmas Rossellius, *Thesaurus artificiosae memoriae*, Venice, Antonio Padovani 1579, 12r.



Fig. 4 – *Lucifer*, Cosmas Rossellius, *Thesaurus artificiosae memoriae*, Venice, Antonio Padovani 1579, 12r.

flames, caught in the act of torturing the damned.⁴¹ To activate the readers' imagination, the Dominican uses the imperative of the second-person singular (*consider*), while as regards the spaces dedicated to the seven deadly sins, he prefers the future form of the second person singular, in order to fill these spaces with images of the damned (“*hos omnes variis poenis cruciatibusve diversis defatigatos cernere poteris*”).⁴²

The annotations on the peripheral elements of *Inferno* offer as many interesting examples. On the boat, which is barely recognisable behind Lucifer in the river that surrounds the entire infernal area (Fig. 4), the author declares that he has painted “a ship guided by demons” (“*actas a daemonibus navus*”) that carries condemned souls to different parts of *Inferno*.⁴³ From these indications, readers must reinvent their own personal ship crowded with demons and the dead.

In the illustration, to the right of the ship, there is a cavity where the inscription “*PEC-CATORES CAVERNA*” can be glimpsed. The Dominican explains the reason for this: “With this sign should be declared to the viewers” (“*hoc signo inspectoribus declaretur*”) a tunnel that cannot be depicted in painting, through which the souls of the condemned fall into *Inferno*.⁴⁴ Here too, readers are urged to enrich a simple outline with vivid *imagines*.

To close the section on infernal *loci*, the Dominican leaves a suggestive message using verbs in the imperative:

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, f. 9r.

⁴² *Ibid.*, f. 9v.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, f. 11r.

⁴⁴ “*attamen expostulabat ratio, ut illorum infoelicium animarum ad Infernum descensus, qui pingi non poterat, hoc signo inspectoribus declaretur*”: *ibid.*, ff. 11r-11v.

Quaeso vos omnes lectores inspecotresque viventes: ad inferni profunda, cogitatu vestro descendite, poenasque universas perpendite, ut cruciatibus praedictis admoniti.⁴⁵

It is a prayer made to the reader-viewers to be able to descend, through the imaginative power of the mind, into the abysses of Inferno and to examine all the scenes of the various punishments so that the spectators are warned against aforementioned torments.

In this way, through texts full of expressive force, provoked by the use of *enargeia* and the presence of elementary yet captivating illustrations, “the prison of apostate spirits” will be realised in the minds of readers as an educational theatre.

The scenography of the great theatre of memory: from Rossellius to Fludd

Compared to the detailed and abundant ecphrastic descriptions devoted to the *loci*, Rossellius spends few words on the use of the entire mnemonic system. Excluding the advice to place the images of *res* to be memorised in the appropriate places – so, for example, one should not use Inferno to memorise the names of the angels –,⁴⁶ he remains ambiguous about the relationship between the ‘inhabitants’ that are embedded in the *loci* and the *imagines agentes* to be placed in the places later. How then should mnemonic actors perform the memorable dramas?

Fortunately, there is a text that, despite being published almost half a century later, makes up for this shortcoming. It is Robert Fludd’s *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia* (...) (1617-21), a great encyclopaedic work in which, among the numerous *artes cosmi minoris*, the *ars memorativa* is treated. This treatment is highly original but also shares similarities with Rossellius’ work.⁴⁷

In the second tome that delves into the *historia Microcosmi*, the *ars memoriae* is discussed in one of the sections devoted to the various techniques and human sciences. Although it consists of only 24 pages divided into three *Books*, we can consider this part as an autonomous treatise belonging to the *corpus mnemonicus* that effectively exploits technical ecphrasis. The *incipit* of *Liber I* constitutes a true *parecphrasis*, as the author recounts in the first person his long wanderings in the south of France in search of the secrets of the *ars* (Chap. I). After discussing the definition of memory and the crucial importance of *phantasia* (Chap. II-IV), the author explains the functioning of the system of the *ars memoriae* and its rules, introducing the categories of the *ars rotunda* and the *ars quadrata*.

For reasons of space, we do not intend to deal here with Fludd’s complicated mnemonic system, which has already been analysed in depth by Francis A. Yates.⁴⁸ Instead, we

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, f. 11v.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, f. 51v.

⁴⁷ Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi*.

⁴⁸ Yates, *The Art of Memory*.

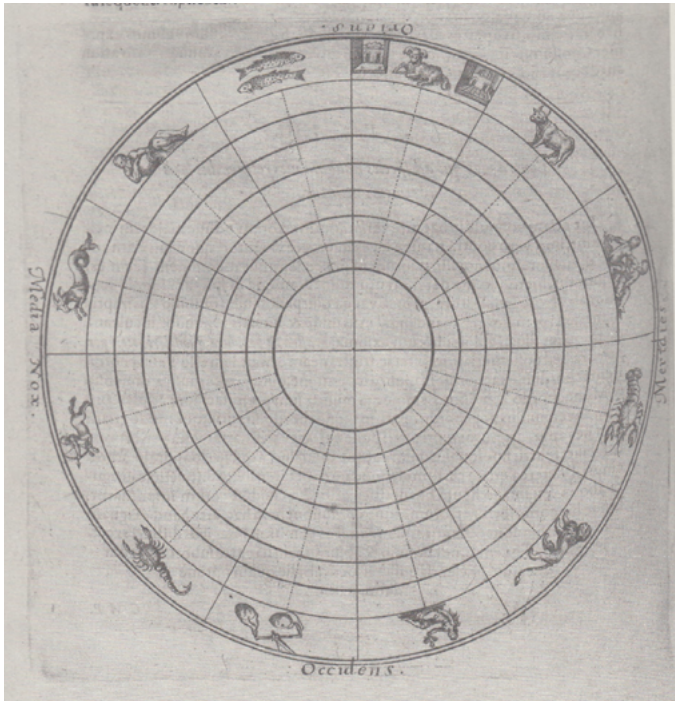


Fig. 5 – Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris Metaphysica, physica atque technica historia in duo volumina secundum cosmi differentiam diuisa*, typis Hieronymi Galleri, Oppenheimii, 1617-21, Tract. I, Sect. II, Port. III, Lib. I, 54.

would like to summarise the essential points in the order in which they are treated in *Liber I*. The *ars rotunda* deals with ideas, i.e. the spiritual and metaphysical *res*, whose *loci* are the celestial spheres, while the *ars quadrata* is dedicated to the physical and corporeal world, and uses the *loci* in the form of palaces and rooms. The author emphasises that these must be based on real existing buildings, known personally to readers.⁴⁹ He also criticises those who leave *loci* empty. In return, Fludd recommends inserting figures or pictures in the *loci* in order to distinguish them well from one another. As will be seen later, these rules, reminiscent of the ‘inhabitants’ of Rossellius’ infernal *loci*, will be further elaborated in the following *Libri*.

The *ars rotunda* uses the eight celestial spheres organised concentrically around the central circle of the earth. The accompanying illustration is schematic and represents only the concentric circles, while the eighth sphere depicts the twelve constellations of the zodiac (Fig. 5). The author invites readers, using the first-person plural of the future (“imag-

⁴⁹ Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi*, Tract. I, Sect. II, Port. III, Lib. I, 53.

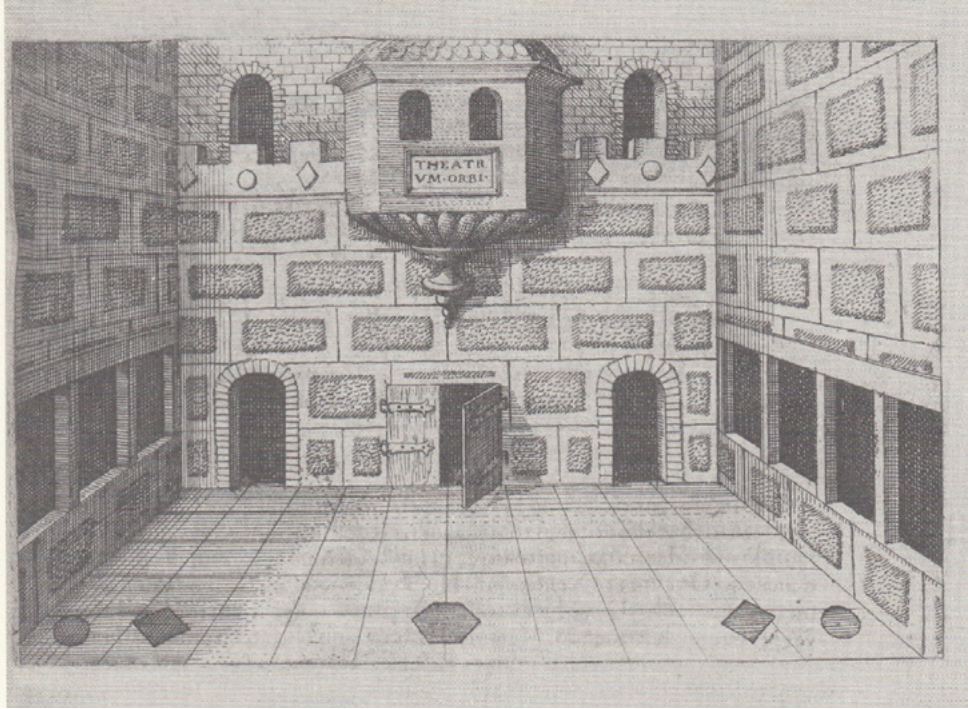


Fig. 6 – Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris Metaphysica, physica atqve technica historia in duo volumina secundum cosmi differentiam diuisa, typis Hieronymi Galleri, Oppenheimii, 1617-21, Tract. I, Sect. II, Port. III, Lib. I, 55.*

inabimur”), to imagine the eastern part of each sign occupied by the white theatre (“theatro albo”), and the western part by the black one (“theatro nigro”).⁵⁰ This is followed by the famous perspective illustration depicting the theatre stage (Fig. 6) of which Yates had advanced the hypothesis that it might be Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre.⁵¹

With regard to the *ars quadrata*, a ‘standard model’ for mnemonic places is presented: “erit conclave sive cubiculum, eius latera sint aequaliter quadrata aut parallela”⁵². In other words, readers must choose real such rooms as a model. On the other hand, the author introduces some changes in the realistic *loci*. On the entrance door are thus painted (“dipingatur”), as distinguishing marks, “historia aliqua insignis” such as the story of Medea killing her brother, Hercules slaying the Hydra, etc.,⁵³ while inside the room the four walls,

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵¹ Yates, *The Art of Memory*, Chap. 16.

⁵² Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi*, Tract. I, Sect. II, Port. III, Lib. I, 56.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

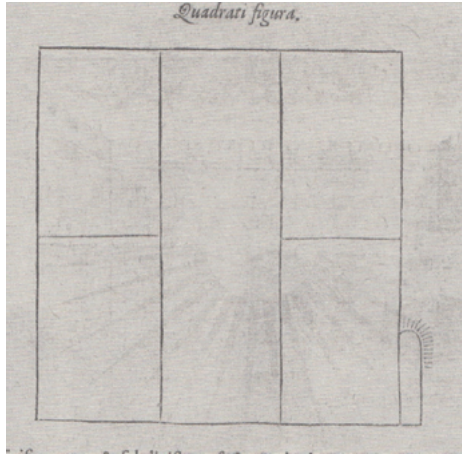


Fig. 7 – Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris Metaphysica, physica atque technica historia in duo volumina secundum cosmi differentiam diuisa*, typis Hieronymi Galleri, Oppenheimii, 1617-21, Tract. I, Sect. II, Port. III, Lib. I, 57.

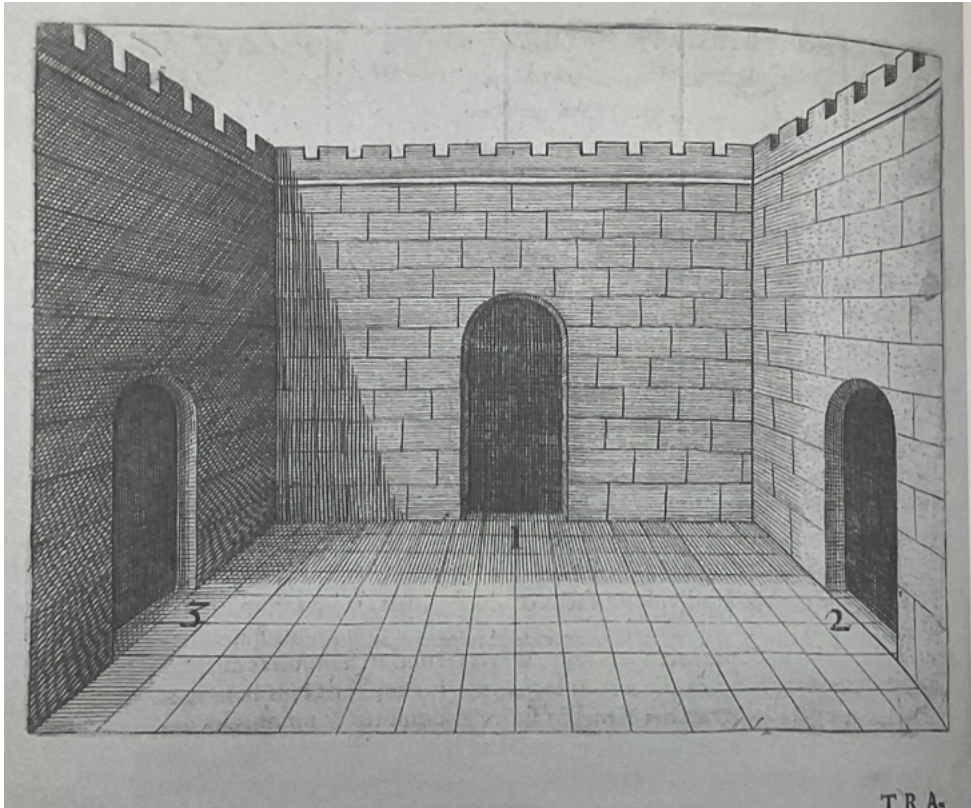


Fig. 8 (below) – Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris Metaphysica, physica atque technica historia in duo volumina secundum cosmi differentiam diuisa*, typis Hieronymi Galleri, Oppenheimii, 1617-21, Tract. I, Sect. II, Port. III, Lib. I, 58.

ceiling and floor are divided into five quadrangles (Fig. 7). Each subdivision is assigned the form of a theatre (“damibus [...] figuram theatri”) with three doors.⁵⁴ With the illustration of the latter (Fig. 8), *Liber I*, the section devoted to the mnemonic *loci*, closes.

What characterises Fludd’s mnemonic system is therefore the hierarchical structure of *loci*, similar to Rossellius’, in which minor places are included in major ones (*Ars rotunda*: celestial spheres > theatres / *Ars quadrata*: building > rooms > walls > theatres).

How to build theatres for the celestial sphere

Liber I

In the following, we would like to analyse the characteristics of the *theatri caelestes* (white theatre and black theatre) where the performances of the inhabitants-actors are staged.

Chapter X of *Liber I* is dedicated to the discussion of the celestial theatres. It is a typical ‘standard’ description of the *loci* in which, using the future form (*habebit*),⁵⁵ only the five equidistant gates are mentioned, while the exact size, matter and proportion of the five columns is unclear. Readers must therefore imagine the other elements by resorting to the illustration at the end of the chapter (Fig. 5). There is no doubt that the latter was inserted to visualise the theatres of the celestial spheres (*orbis caelestes*) discussed in the previous chapter,⁵⁶ as it bears the inscription “THEATRVM ORBI” (the theatre for the sphere).

Contrary to the fascinating hypothesis put forward by Yates, we do not consider it plausible that the illustration can faithfully represent Shakespeare’s theatre, since the rules introduced by Fludd on actually existing buildings only apply to the *loci* of the *ars quadrata* dedicated to the sublunar world. On the contrary, as mentioned earlier, the *locus*, which is presented here in the form of a theatre, should at first appear as an abstract model, of which some details are fixed while others can be modified by readers. Considering that this voluminous work was an international publishing venture, written in Latin and published on the Old Continent (Oppenheim), it seems inappropriate that the author wanted to present a particular theatre in London as a model for the *loci*, that were supposed to be well known to readers.

On the other hand, unlike the primitive illustrations in Rossellius’ treatise, Fludd’s are so realistic and expressive that they compensate for the chapter’s reductive description. Indeed, as will be seen below, the parts where ecphrasis exerts its greatest influence are the representations of scenographies and dramas that take place on an empty theatre.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵⁶ “Locum communis artis rotundae est pars mundi aetherea, scilicet orbis caelestes, numerando ab octava sphaera & finiendo in sphaera Lunae”: *ibid.*, 54.

Liber II

After presenting, at the beginning of *Liber II*, a series of ‘visual alphabets’ useful for composing the *imagines agentes* (Chapters I-II), the author elaborates on the remaining *loci* for the *ars rotunda*, providing a detailed indication of their architectural composition and their respective images.

Within the two celestial theatres (eastern-white and western-black) are the images of the inhabitants-actors interacting with the *imagines agentes* (Chap. III). Only the figures for the eastern theatre of the sign of Aries are listed concretely in the texts, namely Jason, Medea, Paris, Daphne and Phoebus. All have to do with the sign of the zodiac connected to the world of Greek mythology. The same series of images is also used for western theatre, but ‘we must imagine’ (“debemus [...] imaginary”) that these appear faded, because theatre is dark.⁵⁷

Chapter V constitutes a true technical *ecphrasis* and concretely illustrates how to construct the interior of the theatre. It consists of five stage sets placed in front of the five doors of the theatre marked by different colours. In the first *locus* there ‘shall be’ (“erit”) a snow-covered meadow (white), while the second ‘should have’ (“habeat”) a meadow stained with blood to evoke the battle fought there (red). The third *locus* should represent a terrain with green grasses and trees (green), while the fourth a valley irrigated by springs (blue), and finally the fifth a dark underground cave (black).⁵⁸

In front of these colourful scenes are five columns. They too must be clearly distinguished through shapes and colours.⁵⁹ With regard to the latter, the author recommends choosing the ‘opposite’ colour to that of the door: white, for example, will contrast with black. The outer columns are round, the one in the centre is hexagonal, the intermediate columns are square, as can be clearly seen in the illustration at the end of the chapter accompanied by the words “figura vera theatri” (Fig. 9). We can therefore interpret the images as a reworking of the previous figure (Fig. 5), which fits the *ecphrastic* descriptions. The *theatrum* presented in *Liber I* as an abstract *locus* is thus transformed into a ‘complete structure’, the main elements of which cannot be changed.⁶⁰

Finally, through the power of imagination (“phantastico conceputu”), rings and chains are attached to the five columns, to which various animals are tied. These additional elements are used to represent the so-called “insertions” (“inserentes”) such as adverbs,

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ From this point of view, the hypothesis put forward by Yates cannot be completely denied, as some element of the Globe Theatre may be reflected in the first illustration, which on the other hand is not intended to instruct readers on how to construct the *theatrum celeste* but merely provides an approximate appearance of the theatre.

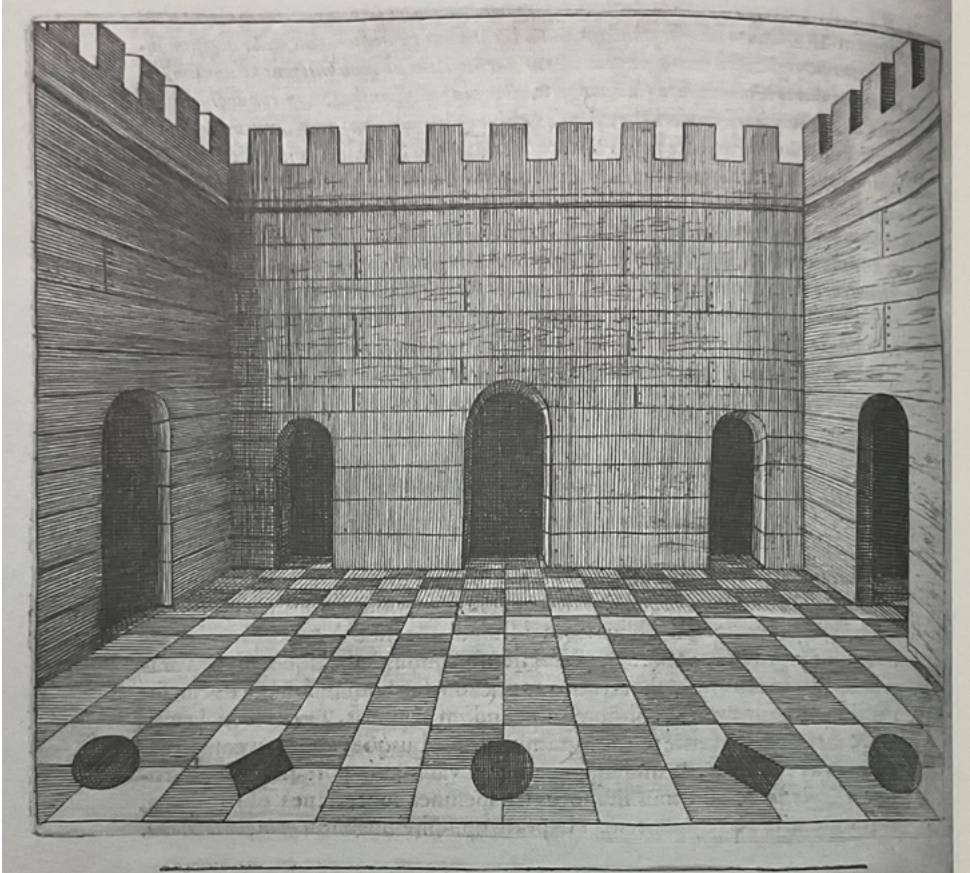


Fig. 9 – Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris Metaphysica, physica atqve technica historia in duo volumina secundum cosmi differentiam diuisa*, typis Hieronymi Galleri, Oppenheimii, 1617-21, Tract. I, Sect. II, Port. III, Lib. II, 64.

conjunctions, prepositions and interjections found in the arguments to be remembered,⁶¹ while in order to memorise the most important and significant parts that are composed, for example, of verbs, adjectives or nouns, it is necessary to have the human figures perform some significant action within the previously constructed sets. In this way the curtain of the mnemonic theater opens.

⁶¹ Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi*, Tract. I, Sect. II, Port. III, Lib. II, 63.

Medea, tragic protagonist or versatile actress in the *theatrum mundi*

In Chapter VI of *Liber II*, even before placing the *imagines agentes*, Fludd invites readers to imagine the stories staged by the inhabitants of the theatres suited to each zodiac sign (*locus*).⁶² In other words, regardless of the *res* to be remembered, readers must determine the scenes of the play to be performed. The only concrete example mentioned in the texts is that of the sign of Aries, in which the legend of the Golden Fleece takes place. Among the many characters, the author's favourite figure is Medea.

The first scene, which takes place in front of the white door of the celestial theatre, depicts Medea on top of the snowy Atlas mountain, caught in the act of gathering magic herbs, while in the second the woman stands in front of the red door. Unlike ancient theatres, which avoided depicting bloody scenes, here Medea kills her brother and throws his limbs onto the grass. The third scene (green) depicts her gathering herbs again in Thes-saria to help her beloved Jason, and the fourth (blue) depicts the scene in which Medea and Jason board the ship with the Golden Fleece. The fifth and last (black) shows the dark house in which the bull and the dragon, guardians of the fleece, are enclosed.⁶³

All these scenes composed by the actors, the scenographies and the theatrical structure, embody 'dramatic' mental images, invented through the power of *phantasia*, and do not appear in the illustration of the theatre. The description devoted to the *histriones agentes* thus constitutes a veritable ecphrasis.

Liber III

Liber III deals with how the mythological actors interact with the *imagines agentes*, proposing precisely the explanation that Rossellius' treatise lacked. In Chapter II, the five tragic scenes presented in the eastern theatre of Aries are modified to fit the 'significant words' (*vocabuli significantes*) to be remembered.

When Fludd emphasises the importance of the scenes to be invented, which should be appropriate to the situation in each place, he demonstrates the examples using the first-person singular and plural:⁶⁴ "if I wanted to mark the word 'book' in the first place" ("si vocabulum (Liber) velim in primo loco denotarem"), "I would imagine" ("imaginarbor") Medea in the white meadow intent on looking at a magic book. If the second word to be memorised were "exalted" ("exaltabat"), "we can imagine" ("imaginabimur") Medea looking down from the top of the tower, anxiously watching to see if her father is chasing her. Thus the third word 'pleased' is depicted in the third place, where Medea is cheerful because she has found the herbs useful for her purpose, while the fourth *vocabulum* 'knife' is used in the scene where Medea throws the fratricidal murder weapon into the sea. The

⁶² *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

last example, that of ‘light’, is assimilated to the spark that escapes from the cave where Jason fights the bull and the dragon. Thus we can move on in the direction of the western theatre, where the actions performed by Medea are glimpsed in the darkness. Of course, in the remaining zodiac signs there should be other great mythological actors, associated with their respective constellations, playing their main roles.

This wonderful versatility of Medea shows the elasticity required of actors in mnemonic theatres. In other words, in Fludd’s mnemonic system, the *imagines agentes* are not simply placed passively in the *loci*, they are instead asked to perform an improvised skit together with the actors-inhabitants of the celestial theatres. It is worth noting that in Chapter VII of *Liber I*, following the rules of the ‘real’ *loci*, Fludd criticises those who only place images of animals in the *loci*: they are unable to express concepts related to human actions such as praying, teaching, reading, etc. In return, he recommends using human figures, because “there is no action that man cannot express clearly, either by imitating it or by practising it”.⁶⁵ In other words, the inhabitants of Fludd’s *mundus mnemonicus* must be polyvalent actors. This statement recalls the well-known *topos* of the *theatrum mundi*. If we can recognise the influence of Shakespeare in Fludd, it is precisely because of this literary-philosophical concept that compares the world to a theatre, human life to a stage, and every single man to an actor.

Conclusion: the ecphrasis that realises the theatre of the mundus mnemonicus

In the *corpus mnemonicus* of the early modern age, it was taken for granted that readers knew how to implement a set of mnemonic rules in their minds. Some systems even required them to place a complex set of *loci* and *imagines* where improvised performances were to be performed, giving the inhabitants-actors directions on how to act. This explains why mnemonics are so compatible with the theatrical model. In addition to Fludd’s examples, Rossellius’ infernal-paradisical *loci*, which have the form of an amphitheatre, also suggest the same similarity. It is noteworthy that Cicero, an absolute authority on mnemonic theory, compared the *imagines agentes* to theatrical *personae* (masks/characters) capable of representing the *res* to be remembered.⁶⁶

Dolce and Della Porta, both influential authors of mnemonic treatises, were also playwrights.⁶⁷ Their descriptions of mnemonic scripts are typically ecphrastic in that they succeed in vividly and movingly depicting mental scenes.

⁶⁵ “cum nulla sit actio sive belluina sive humana, quam non queat homo luculenter sua actione exprimere, sive imitando, sive partes suas proprias agendo”. Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi*, Tract. I, Sect. II, Port. III, Lib. I, 53.

⁶⁶ “rerum memoria propria est oratoris; eam singulis personis bene positus notare possumus, ut sententias imaginibus, ordinem locis comprehendamus”. In Cicero, *De oratore*, 2.88.359-360.

⁶⁷ Dolce recommends placing the inhabitants in *loci* in the form of Inferno, Limbo and Purgatory. Cf. Dolce, *Dialogue*, 36.

If we consider the *ars memorativa*, especially the one developed from the late 16th century onwards, as a psychic contraption composed of various intellectual techniques, we can then analyse it from a different point of view, i.e. that of ‘technical ecphrasis’. In this sense, the 16th century mnemonic treatises appear as a creative reconstruction of the lost technical manuals of antiquity, where the *ars memorativa* was taught as a basic tool.

In ancient Greek and Roman times, various rhetorical figures were exploited to convey knowledge about architecture, civil engineering, medicine, etc., inviting readers to practise the theories by themselves or to construct the described objects in their minds. The same was true of the *corpus mnemonicus* in which, instead of explanations on the workings of gears, wheels and levers, the intellectual faculties were illustrated, considered as mechanical contraptions that guaranteed the efficacy of the *ars*.

By rethinking the relationship taken for granted between mnemonics and ecphrasis, we could interpret this cognitive system from a mechanical-technological point of view, although at the same time it is also a creative and intellectual practice. For this reason, it is important to introduce the idea of ‘plural’ ecphrasis, which not only serves to explain the *imagines agentes*, but also proposes the existence of other types of ecphrasis, such as those needed to illustrate *loci-imagines*, the ‘technical’ ecphrasis that invites readers to construct in the first person what is described in the treatises, and so on.

Through the analysis of the ‘various’ ecphrases, early modern mnemonic treatises thus reveal new and rich mental scenes.

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