***Memory as Philosophy***

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**Chapter 1, Section 5**

Memory and Philosophy in the Technological World

Frances Yates, the pioneer of scholarly interest in the memorial arts, grasped the problem of modernity, which is the problem of technology. She writes, “The progressive deterioration of memory brought about by the march of technical invention—from printing to television—makes it almost impossible for us to imagine what a memory built up by the classical mnemonic can have been like.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Technology cancels memory because efficiency, the measure of technology, demands the sacrifice of the outdated. The present is not informed by the past because the past was less efficient.

The philosophical sense of memory is not a science that can be taught. It is not a method, and therefore cannot be quantified, predicted, and mastered. The ingenious art of seeing is not susceptible to control. The search for a philosophical method is the search for scientific control, the search for *clear and distinct ideas*, as we learn from Descartes (and, in different terms, from Kant and Bacon). “Memory as philosophy” can never convince those who simply do not see the internal form of things—it can never produce the sort of dumb certainty desired by technology. Reflection, which never gets behind the exterior of vacuous actuality, *is* method. Technology is the application of technique, [*techne*](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%CF%84%CE%AD%CF%87%CE%BD%CE%B7). Technology and method go hand in hand; the efficiency of method is perfected by technique.

The relationship between memory and method is more complex than one of simple opposition. It is the relationship of Cronus to Zeus. Yates writes, “If Memory was the Mother of the Muses, she was also to be the Mother of Method. Ramism, Lullism, the art of memory—all those confused constructions compounded of all the memory methods which crowd the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—are symptoms of a search for a method. Seen in the context of this growing search or urge, it is not so much the madness of [Giordano] Bruno’s systems as their uncompromising determination to find a method which seems significant.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Yates correctly observes that the memory arts of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance are attempts at discovering a method for producing clear and distinct ideas, certainty, and control over nature. These attempts finally bear fruit in the Cartesian method of the seventeenth century.

How are we to understand this claim? The history of the memory tradition follows two lines: what Paolo Rossi calls “the ‘speculative’ line and the ‘technical’ line.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The “mnemotechnic,” which originates with Simonides, is already a technique, which attempts to dominate the speculative, philosophical line of memory. As we will see in the following chapter, mnemotechnic is the mother of method, and it is this technique that Montaigne ultimately rejects in his own memorial philosophy. The “speculative” line—that is, “memory as philosophy”—cannot be reduced to or replaced by technique. *Ingenium* is mother wit, the gift of the Muses.

Memory, however, is more than *ingenium*; we have seen that this aspect depends on *memoria*, the psychological remembrance of things past, for its material. This is what technology *can* replace, and this substitution removes the foundation from a philosophical memory. Yates mentions the printing press and television. When one has access to books, one does not have as great a need to hold a great many things in one’s memory; reference can always be made to a paper memory. The book, however, is properly a supplement to memory, not a replacement. Mary Carruthers writes, “In none of the evidence I have discovered is the act of writing itself regarded as a supplanter of memory, not even in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Rather books are themselves memorial cues and aids, and memory is most like a book, a written page or wax tablet upon which something is written.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In a similar spirit, Marshall McLuhan, the philosopher of media, writes, “Print provided a vast new memory for past writings that made a personal memory inadequate.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The printed word answers that inadequacy, but does not challenge the sovereignty of memory. It is a very recent phenomenon that books are written for the sake of conveying information or for being consulted and referenced. Printed books were always meant to be read, not consulted.

It is not printing, but the computer that has accelerated this assault on memory exponentially. Computers are unlimited data banks, and in the age of the computer there is no need to retain anything whatsoever in one’s memory. Access to *information* is available everywhere, at every time. We now wear our computers over our eyes, so that we are never separated from the technological promise of information. Information replaces real knowledge, real wisdom. To be well-informed is not to be wise. Information is ubiquitous and has no natural end; it is only a means for the particular moment. We give the proper information on an application, or we acquire the information needed to diagnose an automotive problem. Technology itself is, as Jacques Ellul has said, “nothing more than *means* and the *ensemble of means*.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Knowledge has an influence on thinking itself, but information is always external to thinking, always localized to a particular situation. However, information is susceptible to control in a way that knowledge and thinking are not. It can be infinite, and it is now the best distributed thing in the world. The “Cloud”, with its promise of unlimited information storage, is the latest idol of technology. Its ephemeral name is appropriate. Nonetheless, once we apprehend the efficiency of the Cloud, it would surely be foolish to concern ourselves with individual human *memoria*.

Without *memoria*, there can be no *ingenium*. The latter requires a rich field of memorial content. Putting a new twist on things, or finding their proper order and inner form, presupposes that these things are held in one’s memory, in such a way that they can be surveyed in one glance. The matter at issue must be internalized for this to occur. Information is never internalized because it never serves anything more than the end of the particular moment. It is always external; technology substitutes the external for the internal because the external memory is more efficient. There is no deterioration and no ambiguity. Reflection is the faculty of the technological world. However, when the contents of memory are external, they can never be reorganized and thus can never elicit the ingenious flash of seeing. The Internet gives us one thing after another, not the complete view of the thing. The computer can only ever repeat what is programmed into it; it can never create, in the sense in which human art creates, or discover, in the sense of the Latin *inventio*. The parent, as we see, is castrated by its offspring. Mnemotechnics have sought and discovered that *telos*, the discovery of which has annulled mnemotechnics.

The problem of the modern world is this: once we have technique, we can only go forward. Technology pulls efficiency ahead, and the refusal to maximize efficiency is irrational. Technique carries us along, and there is no turning back. Ellul writes, “Technique engenders itself. When a new technical form appears, it makes possible and conditions a number of others.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Ellul calls this process the self-augmentation of technology. Its two laws are these: “(1) In a given civilization, technical progress is irreversible. (2) Technical progress tends to act, not according to an arithmetic, but according to a geometric progression.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The progress is irreversible because the result of this progress is the maximization of efficiency. Any method becomes defunct when a superior method is discovered. Since technology is always a means, the technique that proves to be the means superior to its alternatives annihilates these alternatives altogether. It is foolishness to apply an inferior means to a situation.

We can see this process of “progress” at work not just in the machines of industry, but also in political technique, in athletic technique, in financial technique. Art and literature, those basic arenas of human expression, have become more and more techniques of representation. Since musicians have discovered the technique of appealing to the mean, music no longer expresses anything. As Karl Jaspers says, “All things are interrelated. The technical mastery of space, time, and matter advances irresistibly, and no longer through casual and isolated discoveries, but by organized collaboration, in the course of which discovery itself has been systematized and subjected to purposive endeavor.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Because there is no turning back, and because efficiency replaces independent thought, technique levels humanity. Ellul writes, “Human beings are, indeed, always necessary. But literally anyone can do the job, provided he is trained to it. Henceforth, men will be able to act only in virtue of their commonest and lowest nature, and not in virtue of what they possess of superiority and individuality. The qualities which technique requires for its advance are precisely those characteristics of a technical order which do not represent individual intelligence.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Technology leads thought, rather than thought leading technology. Anyone can learn a technique, just as anyone can learn the practice of reflection. Technology is not in any way exclusive; it is not coincidental that the technological world and the democratic world historically arise at the same time. Because *ingenium* is not a technique, it cannot be open to all. Nor is it a means to any particular end. It *can* solve problems, but it has no method and its success is rooted in its playful character. World economies, on which so much depends, can no longer wait on philosophical thought. Technique moves in front of thought just as, for Shereshevskii, thought is guided by images. Technology turns us all into Shereshevskiis: not very good at thinking, but with an infinite supply of information at our fingertips. The loss of thought dehumanizes; the technological society is one of self-alienation. T.S. Eliot captured the new human condition early in the twentieth century when he wrote,

We are the hollow men

We are the stuffed men

Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas![[11]](#footnote-11)

In 1929, José Ortega y Gasset observed, “The characteristic of the hour is that the commonplace mind, knowing itself to be commonplace, has the assurance to proclaim the rights of the commonplace and to impose them wherever it will. . . . The mass crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified and select. Anybody who is not like everybody, who does not think like everybody, runs the risk of being eliminated.”[[12]](#footnote-12) When technology attains absolute control and becomes a self-augmenting process, rolling ever forward, it forces the individual to adapt. Human things win an ascendancy over human beings. To thrive, one does not need wisdom; one needs only a willingness to play by the rules of technique. Whatever lies outside the control of technique—whatever disdains to embrace method—is the only true “other” in society. All other difference, so long as it follows technique’s law of maximum efficiency, can be assimilated. This is why reflection and method have won the day in philosophy. Ernst Cassirer correctly writes, “A new determination of value and meaning is now established for [human] consciousness: the genuine ‘purpose’ of action is no longer measured by what it brings about and finally achieves; rather, it is the pure form of doing, the type and direction of the productive force as such, that determines this purpose.” Technology has no essential ends because its purpose is entirely in its means and action.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The effect that this state of things has on memory is to cancel its purpose. The well-meaning technician will say that, in the technological world, whatever is obsolete is altogether dead. There is no longer a use for the memory of the past because what matters is maximal efficiency. When past techniques are overcome by more efficient techniques, they do not persist in haunting the latter. They are forgotten, and the world moves on. Inefficiency is a death warrant for which there can be no pardon.

In the technological world, *memoria* is supplanted by information storage. *Fantasia* is replaced by the technique of artistic production and reproduction. *Ingegno*, without its foundation of *memoria* and *fantasia* in their proper senses, is impossible. The power of true genius to give things a new turn is a threat to mass-life. Where it does still flash to life, its yield is immediately appropriated by technology and transformed into a part of the overall technical process. Even philosophy, in order to retain a place for itself in the technical world-apparatus, must turn its gaze toward linguistics and semiotics, or toward hermeneutics and grammatology, fields in which some method can be articulated. Lovers of wisdom are replaced by “professional philosophers”. In this way, philosophy becomes integrated into the technological society.[[14]](#footnote-14) No longer at issue are the perennial questions about the good and the true. There is no transcendent “good” when all is efficiency. Ortega y Gasset writes, “The mass-man is simply without morality, which is always, in essence, a sentiment of submission to something, a consciousness of service and obligation.”[[15]](#footnote-15) The “true” is whatever can be subjected to quantitative control. The technological world can accomplish great *things*, things not dreamt of in even the recent past. However, there can no longer be great *souls*; the *megalopsuchia* is out of the question.

While the technician tells us that memory is simply useless, the truth is that it is in fact *dangerous* to the technological world. It is perhaps the only thing that can truly threaten the technological order. The only way to launch a holistic critique of a prevailing state of things is to position oneself outside of that state of things. This is no longer possible spatially; technology has overrun every sovereign state in the world. We can only distance ourselves from the technological order temporally. We can only envision a different order by remembering that different orders have prevailed in time gone by. The beliefs, desires, and values of modernity can only be called into question if we remember that other peoples have thrived in the past, despite altogether different sets of beliefs, desires, and values. Without our memory of the past, no complete critique is possible. If we cannot escape a standpoint within the technological world, then the most that we can do is critique its various elements.

“Memory as philosophy” stands over and against technique and method. In staking a claim for the individual human memory, it defies the computer with its infinite capacity for information storage. In investigating the inner form of things, it rejects the completely external view of things given by reflection, which method promises will bring us certainty. It concerns itself with what is and what will be and what has been; it seeks the necessary order of things. Such an inquiry in an age of means, in an age when there are no problems that are not particular to a certain time and place, is an aberration. It is an abnormal discourse, abnormal because it entails a familiarity with a world order different than that within which normal discourse occurs.

If we wish to have philosophy in its classical sense—if we wish to have *thought*—if we wish to have true *inventio*, true insight into *rerum natura* and the human condition—most importantly of all, if we wish to have *self-knowledge*, then we must be willing to entertain the idea that technology is not the *deus ex machina* we have been waiting for to solve all of our problems. Self-knowledge is a recollection of oneself. Technology cannot recall us to ourselves; it can only tell us what we ought to become. The art of auto-biography as a speculative narrative is replaced by the memoirs of the famous, which are nothing more than collections of facts and dates. The Socratic search for self-knowledge is not realized in the memoir of a well-known general or guitarist. No one any longer stands naked before the world. Reflection on the past is not recollection; the latter is more than a thorough date-book.

This analysis is not a jeremiad. I have only meant to draw out the negative side of the technological world for the sake of showing the context in which memory currently abides. One cannot deny that, in the bacchanalia of the technological world, there is much in which to revel. Whatever its effects on human freedom, industrial society has certainly increased the general standard of living.[[16]](#footnote-16) However, technology is irreconcilable to philosophical thinking. We have forgotten the essential character of philosophy, and technology is the instrument of this amnesia. “Philosophy” is now an entry in a website we consult, just as, in Ellul’s words, all “attempts at culture, freedom, and creative endeavor have become mere entries in technique’s filing cabinet.”[[17]](#footnote-17) I propose that the answer to the technological society lies in a return to the cultivation of memory, in the richest sense of its philosophical tradition. For philosophy to thrive over and against the technological world, it must find a new *topos*. Method is always allied with technique. A return toa memorial *topos* would prevent philosophy from becoming just another technique.

If we desire autonomy, we must relearn how to pursue self-knowledge through self-recollection. If we desire *ingenium*, we must build up our memories with as much matter as we are able, so that we can survey the whole in a single view. If we can rediscover how to find the inner form of things through recollection, we can once more possess the wisdom of the Muses. Philosophy can once again move forward if we once remember where the turn was made that resulted in our present technological *aporia*. Ours is a retrograde amnesia, in which the past can slowly be rediscovered if we are willing to undertake the labor.

This is not a seditious proposal, because it cannot ultimately harm technology.[[18]](#footnote-18) Technique will continue to roll along under its own momentum. Philosophy cannot win the day because it cannot match the ruthless efficiency of technique or the standard of living that technology provides. Given the option to embrace new values other than efficiency, there are some who will choose to do so, but in the absence of large-scale catastrophe, most people will always opt to retain the comforts and calculability made possible by technology. The moment philosophy, for its part, adopts efficient techniques, it no longer stands over and against the technological world, but becomes just another cog in the greater mechanism. However, so long as the philosopher remembers to always smile at the technician, it is still possible to carve out a space of one’s own outside of the technological world. Philosophers must keep in mind T.S. Eliot’s two significant questions: “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? / Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”[[19]](#footnote-19)

1. Frances A. Yates, “The Ciceronian Art of Memory,” in *Medioevo e Rinascimento: studi in onore di Bruno Nardi* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1955), 883. A version of this claim is repeated in the opening sentences of the preface to *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001): “In the ages before printing a trained memory was vitally important” (xi). This is to say that the rise of technology signals the end of the classical memory. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yates, *Art of Memory*, 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Paolo Rossi, *Logic and the Art of Memory: The Quest for a Universal Language*, trans. Stephen Clucas (New York: Continuum, 2006), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 16. The reference is to Plato’s claim that writing is a deterrent to memory rather than an aid (*Phaedrus*, 274d-275b). Carruthers does not explain why her claim does not contradict Plato’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage, 1964), 19. Ellul continues: “Our civilization is first and foremost a civilization of means; in the reality of modern life, the means, it would seem, are more important than the ends.” The present section of this work is deeply indebted to Ellul’s analysis of technique. In the following discussion of technology, I am also influenced by, amongst other works, Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” Ernst Cassirer’s “Form and Technology,” Martin Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology,” Karl Jaspers’ *Man in the Modern Age*, Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, and José Ortega y Gasset’s *The Revolt of the Masses*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ellul, *Technological Society*, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid*., 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, trans. Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ellul, *Technological Society*, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. T.S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men,” in *The Complete Plays and Poems: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, trans. Anonymous [J.R. Carey] (New York: W.W. Norton, 1957), 18. Karl Jaspers, in *Man in the Modern Age*, reached the same conclusion: “The technical life-order and the masses are closely interrelated. The huge machinery of social provision must be adapted to the peculiarities of the masses; its functioning, to the amount of labour power available; its output, to the demands of the consumers. We infer, therefore, that the masses ought to rule, and yet we find that they cannot rule” (37). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ernst Cassirer, “Form and Technology,” trans. Wilson McClelland Dunlavey and John Michael Krois, in *Ernst Cassirer on Form and Technology: Contemporary Readings*, eds. Aud Sissel Hoel and Ingvilo Folkvoro (New York: Macmillan, 2012), 34. *C.f.* Donald Phillip Verene, *Philosophy and the Return to Self-Knowledge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997): “Technology is the Promethean gift of Descartes realized as a way of life. In it all is means without ends apart from the means” (143). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *C.f.* Ellul, *Technological Society*, 426-7. For Ellul, the technological society is completed only through the total integration of all opposition. Its aim is to make philosophy subservient to technique, not to nullify it. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ortega y Gasset, *Revolt*, 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), Chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ellul, *Technological Society*, 418. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Herbert Marcuse opposes this claim. He writes, “Remembrance of the past may give rise to dangerous insights, and the established society seems to be apprehensive of the subversive contents of memory,” *One-Dimensional Man*, 98. Marcuse has an over-confidence in the power of historical recollection to foment revolutionary change. He underestimates the technological society’s capacity to appropriate its own past formations as evidence of the superiority of its present formation. Memory is not anathematic to technology because it is subversive, but because it is inefficient. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Eliot, “Choruses from ‘The Rock’,” *Complete Plays and Poems*, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)