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Memory in creation: the context of Rojas's literary recollection

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Dorothy Severin's first monograph, *Memory in 'La Celestina'*, begins with a bold proposition. In the minds of Rojas's characters, she writes, memory 'has become equated with human experience. [...] And the use of *memoria* as the verbal symbol for human consciousness of time, is nothing short of a revolution in meaning' (1970: 2). Her case that 'life and memory become synonymous' (4) rests upon close textual analysis of Rojas's masterpiece; but it is also informed by a judiciously selective use of medieval notions of memory (the scholastic, rhetorical, and theological traditions) and modern theoretical approaches to the novel (such as the theories of Georg Lukács). This methodological combination enables her to lay bare a particularity of Rojas's achievement that had been dimly acknowledged before, but that we now take for granted, thanks in large measure to her monograph: namely that his 'characters are built upon the foundation of memory; [...] Rojas becomes the first Spanish author to attempt through memory to bridge the gap between the subjective and objective worlds of his characters' (11). Before showing how the various characters forge their own lives and identities, often through conflict with others, she brings her exposition to a close with a lapidary restatement of her theme: 'For Rojas, memory is not an artificial act of will, but a natural and inescapable process of the human mind' (18).

The idea that Rojas's characters are built upon the foundation of memory can also be applied to Rojas himself; or, more specifically, to the way he represents himself as a creative writer. For, as we shall see, the genesis of *Celestina* is rooted firmly in memory, defined not in the narrow sense as a static storehouse of facts, but as a dynamically creative faculty, that 'natural and inescapable process of the human mind' (my emphasis). Since the publication of Dorothy Severin's monograph, our appreciation of the complexities of medieval notions of memory and their relevance to literary study has been enriched, most notably by Mary Carruthers (1990, 1998) and, in the Spanish context, by John Dagenais (1994). As my title indicates, I am particularly interested in one aspect of their

research: namely how reading, memory, and composition are part of a creative continuum. As Carruthers puts it in *The Craft of Thought*, within medieval culture memory should be understood 'as the matrix of invention for all human arts, of all human making, including the making of ideas', an understanding that is predicated on 'an assumption that memory and invention, or what we now call "creativity", if not exactly one, are the closest thing to it' (1998: 7).

That memory and invention are two aspects of the same creative process is clear from the epistle ('El autor a un su amigo'), which first survives as Rojas's preface to the *Comedia* of Toledo, 1500. It opens with a moment of reflection: 'Suelen los que de sus tierras absentes se fallan, considerar de qué cosa aquel lugar donde parten mayor inopia o falta padezca' (Rojas 1987: 69). By process of association, one kind of lack, physical absence, immediately triggers thoughts of another, which though abstract, is no less tangible in its consequences: the lack of moral defences against the lust that threatens the dedicatee and his fellow countrymen. Rojas's physical absence serves as a 'locational memory', a mental hook on which to hang recollections of a deeper moral order.¹ Both kinds of absence are filled by the accompanying book, whose physical presence Rojas twice underlines ('*presente obra*', '*estos papeles*'). Adapting Dorothy Severin's description of how memory operates within the fiction, we can also say that '*estos papeles*' bridge the gap between the author's subjective world (his inner thoughts and desires) and his objective reality (his absence, his friends' moral 'inopia' or 'falta').

This exordial reflection is more than a mere passing thought; Rojas dwells on it, amplifying it into a vivid image of memory in action:

Asaz vezes retraydo en mi cámara, acostado sobre mi propia mano, echando mis sentidos por ventores y my juyzio a bolar, me venía a la memoria, no sólo la necesidad que nuestra común patria tiene de la presente obra [...] pero aun en particular vuestra mesma persona, cuya juventud de amor ser presa se me representa aver visto. (69)

This self-portrait is shaped by several motifs commonly found in depictions of contemplative, creative memory: the mental act is embodied in a physical pose; through the metaphors of the hunt and winged thought, it combines both purposeful and free thinking; it demands solitude and introspection, the 'cámara' being both his private room and the chamber of his mind.² More broadly, as both Carruthers and Dagenais show time and again in their studies, memory never has a purely private function, however isolated it necessarily is as an act: fundamentally social in orientation, it is a means of linking the individual ('the subject who remembers') to a community (here, a friend and their 'común patria').

1 'Composition begins with clearly and deliberately locating oneself in a place, which may be an actual location but is most importantly conceived as a mental position' (Carruthers 1998: 73; for other aspects, see 206–07).

2 For the metaphors of the hunt, winged memories, and feathered thoughts, see Carruthers (1990: 20, 246; and 35–37, esp. 36). For meditative postures and seclusion (often within a chamber), see Carruthers (1998: 173–74; 1990: 3–4, 173, 229), and Weiss (1990: 150–51).

Rojas then goes on to recollect his experience of reading the anonymous fragment, and his account bears the traditional hallmark of memory as visualization, as he recalls his contemplative vision of the book: 'Y como *mirasse* su primor [...] *vi* no sólo ser dulce en su principal ystoria [...] *vi* que no tenía su firma del autor' (69–70; my emphasis).³ As is well known, what Rojas found so admirable in the fragment was its depth: each reading would inspire another, in a linked chain of readings that ineluctably uncovers new layers of meaning and thought: 'leýlo tres o quatro vezes, y tantas quantas más lo leýa, tanta más necesidad me ponía de releerlo y tanto más me agradava, y en su processo nuevas sentencias sentía' (69–70). This meditative process, which has its origins in monastic and scholastic culture, and whose relevance to the *Libro de buen amor* has been documented by Dagenais, acquired singular prominence in 15th-century vernacular critical prefaces, commentaries and glosses, when writers such as Enrique de Villena spoke of 'contynua lectura e reposado estudio' (Weiss 1990: 143–51). Meditation links reading to memory as a mental faculty and process, but also to memory as commemoration: the author's name has been lost, but whoever he was, 'es digno de recordable memoria' (70).

Memory operates through mental images, and the *carta* leaves us with two pictures to help us remember Rojas, one embedded inside the other. There is the larger framing image of a pensive man, whose feathered thoughts fly away from the physical and mental confines of his *cámara*, to nest in the needs of his friend and 'nuestra común patria'; within this frame, there is an anecdote, a recollection of Rojas as meditative reader, engaged in a process of discovery, a reading that is at the same time literary *inventio*, the genesis of his own work.

Memory also operates through forgetting. In the preface as a whole – the *carta* and the following poem with its acrostics – memories are thrown into relief, or shaded, through historical loss. Rojas's friend cannot be remembered because he deliberately excluded him from the record; the name of the original author cannot be remembered because the latter allegedly preferred anonymity, 'con temor de detractores y nocibles lenguas' (70). Although he claims to follow the example of the original author, Rojas in fact locates himself between the extremes of exclusion and willed anonymity. The verse acrostics are a poetic way of half-remembering Rojas. He veils his identity, inviting his audience to unveil it, just as he had unveiled layers of meaning in the original manuscript, through a creative reading process: the identification of letters, which are gradually put together to form a name and a place. The acrostics hide, but they also serve as a mnemonic for a person's name and, significantly, that of a town, since we also remember people through association with place.

These recollections of reading and writing are profoundly social since they juxtapose Rojas's contemplative encounter with a book and his desire to continue it – effectively to gloss it through meditative reading – with other people's perceptions of his social duty. He ends the *carta* by imagining accusations that literary

3 For memory, mental images, and visualization, see Carruthers (1990: 9, 16–17, 222–42; 1998: 135–42).

authorship breaks the laws of professional decorum: 'siendo jurista yo [...] es agena de mi facultad' (70). Writing literature is not his authentic activity, and authenticity is the crux of authorship. Rojas gets past the anxiety of authorship by locating the problem within memory. By this I mean that what Rojas asks us to remember is not him as author so much as the embodiment of a creative process, based on the operations of memory, which sets writers and readers in a dynamic chain of reflection upon events, their personal relevance and their transcendental significance.

The content of the verse acrostics encourages readers to follow the same habits of thought that he himself practised, and that made his own composition possible. When he justifies his 'limpio motivo', for example, he exhorts his readers: 'buscad bien el fin de aquesto que escrivo, / o del principio leed su argumento' (73). Note how the interpretative act mobilizes a synoptic meditation of past, present, and future moments of reading: the end (or objective) of the tale, what I am writing (and you are reading) now, and the explanatory *argumento* at the beginning of the work. Identical temporal structures may be found elsewhere:

Jamás yo no vi en lengua romana,
después que me acuerdo, ni nadie la vido,
obra de estilo tan alto y sobido
en tusca ni griega ni en castellana.
No trae sentencia de donde no mana
loable a su autor y eterna memoria,
al qual Jesuchristo reciba en su gloria
por su pasión sancta que a todos nos sana. (74–75)

The value of the present work emerges through recollection of its relation to past practice; reading it releases a continuous flow of thoughts that project the mind forwards, indeed beyond time, to reflect upon our place in the Providential scheme of salvation. Ultimately, the new book is an instrument (a 'fino arnés', 75), that will help us forget one thing ('olvidemos los vicios'), and remember another (our crucified saviour) in a process that is a model of memory as prudence.⁴

Why turn the *carta* into a poem? It is not simply a vehicle for an acrostic. Through rhyme and rhythm the epistle is restated in more memorable fashion, but the two statements are not identical. The second is a poetic gloss that elaborates and reshapes the earlier thoughts, which thus acquire dynamic life, where recollection and literary invention are seamlessly conjoined. This is merely one instance of a vogue that began in the 1500s with the *glosas* of the *Cancionero general*, or those on Jorge Manrique's *Coplas* (Alonso de Cervantes would publish the first in 1502), and which would continue throughout the sixteenth century. But the structure also looks back to the basic compositional habits of exemplary discourse, and the correlative habits of ethical reading. Like Juan Manuel's *Conde*

4 The relationship between reading, memory, and prudence is one of the central themes of Dagenais's book (1994; see esp. 60–64); see also Carruthers (1990: 9); Weiss (1990: 155–57).

Lucanor, the epistle and acrostics offer a frame story, an exemplary anecdote, a poem that summarizes the key ideas as a basis for personal reflection, and a concluding picture (for Juan Manuel a manuscript drawing; for Rojas, a mental picture of crucified Christ).

Despite the move from *Comedia* to *Tragicomedia*, the paratextual material preserves some of the basic structures outlined above. The new prologue is composed of recollected readings, glossed by being applied to the author's specific circumstances, and then generalized for the world at large. It begins with a *sententia* – 'omnia secundum litem fiunt' – which is 'digna de perpetua y recordable memoria' (77). And it is remembered precisely through the creative process of gloss and application. Rojas does not ask us to remember his immediate source for this quotation, Petrarch, just as he conceals the full extent of his borrowing from the humanist's treatise on Fortune, although his more educated readers could certainly have identified it. More than the product (an 'original' text), what matters is the process of remembering a text, thinking and living through it. And in this respect – memorative reading and the acquisition of prudence – the prologue comes close to merging with the fictional world of the text. Just as the characters live out their desires and conflicts through texts that are misread or misremembered, so in the new preface reading is a site of desire and conflict, another instance of Heraclitan struggle. The details of Rojas's recollection of the initial reception of the *Comedia* are too well known to need rehearsal here.⁵ But his record certainly makes us think twice about a 'común patria' in which there is no community in reading or memory.

Although Rojas leaves his own particular imprint on the interaction between memory and literary creation, he is not, of course, unique; and to throw his preface into relief, we do not have to look far back in time, for even a cursory examination of some of the key texts of the 1490s reveals some fascinating analogues. I shall give just two examples from early modern best-sellers. Diego de San Pedro's *Cárcel de amor* (1492) is framed by acts of memory, authorial and fictional. The author sets the present book in context, by recalling its genesis in two previous works, the *Sermón* and *Arnalte y Lucenda*, or more accurately in his patron's reading of these earlier efforts. It is important to note the rhetorical point of the recollection. It forms part of a broader discourse, the anxiety of authorship, in which the writer doubts his own talents, even whether to write at all, and fears the effects of malicious criticism. All fairly conventional one might say, were it not for a particular twist, an interplay of memory and forgetting. San Pedro recalls but does not name the books that inspired this commission. And yet they are hardly insignificant, because he fears they may leave an unwanted textual residue in the new work:

5 See Deyermond (2001), Seidenspinner-Núñez (2007). In his account of the multifarious responses to his book, Rojas draws on eating imagery conventionally applied to reading: 'unos les roen los huesos que no tienen virtud, que es la hystoria toda junta' (80; i.e. some gnaw at the bare bones of the plot, and ignore the sustaining *meollo* of the entire work).

Podré ser reprehendido si en lo que agora escrivo tornare a dezir algunas razones de las que en otras cosas he dicho. De lo cual suplico a vuestra merced me salve, porque como he hecho otra escritura de la calidad desta, no es de maravillar que la memoria desfallezca; y si tal se hallare, por cierto más culpa tiene en ello mi olvido que mi querer. (San Pedro 1971: 80)

Silencing his earlier work distances San Pedro from the terrain of *auctoritas*. On the margins of this terrain, he is a writer, to be sure, but he lacks the status to parade the memorable textual corpus of an *auctor*. On the other hand, fears of self-plagiarism acknowledge, even invite, the possibility of going back, of identifying the works in question, and rereading them to locate the repetitions and borrowings. San Pedro was writing at a time when the scholastic vocabulary of authorship – ‘auctor’, ‘poeta’ – was being transferred to the vernacular, non-academic context. Although in the process this vocabulary acquired new nuances (for San Pedro, ‘el autor’ is a persona who straddles the worlds of fiction and reality), it still possessed residual connotations that could occasionally be perceived as inappropriate.

More than modesty is at stake here, however. In her chapter ‘Memory and Authority’ (1990: 189–220), Carruthers describes how texts acquired authority through the adaptation process, which ‘socialized’ them (213) in their dynamic transmission through communities of readers and writers. What mattered was not the written, but the writing; not the book as an end in itself, or self-contained product, but the book as part of a chain of knowledge, linked to other books through acts of reading and composition, all bound together ‘in a dialogue of textual allusions and transformations’ (218). The book supported the creative and ethical functions of memory, but did not ‘mime’ it (194); this is to say that *memoria rerum* – internalizing the essential values and ideas of a text – mattered more than memorizing its actual words, or *memoria verborum*. San Pedro’s self-plagiarism is, to adapt Carruthers (218–20), a failure of invention produced by a failure of memory: if he unwittingly allows fragments of the earlier texts to crop up *verbaliter*, it is because his untrained mind has failed properly to digest their ‘calidad’, or underlying style, themes, and forms, and reproduce them anew.

Speaking of digesting a text, we move into the fiction itself, and its famous concluding scene. Realizing that his desire for Laureola is fruitless, Leriano withdraws to his bed to die, oblivious to the entreaties of his friends and the lament of his mother: ‘como él sienpre se acordava de Laureola, de lo que allí pasava tenía poca memoria’ (174). His memory is focused anxiously on the textual traces of the woman he loves, her two letters (actually three; San Pedro is obviously less concerned with *memoria verborum*). To tear them up would discredit their author, ‘en dexar perder razones de tanto precio’; to give them to a member of his household risks public scandal and dishonour. The solution is to shred them, and ingest them in a goblet of water. While it is true that Leriano did not write these letters, his mental state recalls San Pedro’s own anxiety of authorship, with both reader and writer caught between silence and publication, oblivion and memory.

The scene stages a curious allegory of reading, memory, and literary invention. The digestion (reading) of Laureola's letters is simultaneously a public, almost ritual, display and intensely private. Her story is not the immediate genesis of another, but ends with the life of the reader. Although this passage acknowledges a category of private memory, it retains memory's fundamentally communal dimension and its association with re-creation and transmission. As Leriano swallows the letters, bringing the larger tale to a close, 'puestos en mí los ojos, dixo "Acabados son mis males"' (176). Through this gaze the tale passes from one man to another; then – with the author returning to Spain and with fiction bleeding back into reality – it passes to yet another man, the patron, through yet another physical gesture, the *besamanos*. The rapid *desenlace* brings these final homosocial gestures into closer contact with the colophon: 'Acabóse esta obra [...] por cuatro compañeros alemanes' (176). This is a coincidence, but even so it is a poetic one, and it underscores how written memories are dependent upon a network of male friendships that act as the conduits of social values.

My final example is *Amadís de Gaula*, which was assembled in the early 1490s but whose first surviving edition was printed in Zaragoza in 1508. Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo constructs his entire preface around memory, truth, and recovery of lost and corrupt texts. Memory is woven into it not only as an integral part of a discussion of fiction, verisimilitude, and history but also as a rhetorical device, a means of positioning the writer within a hierarchy of authorship. The preface is bipartite, structured around two moments of reflection, past and present. The prologue's opening phrase 'Considerando los sabios antiguos' (1987–88: 219) introduces general considerations on the truth status of writings that purport to record heroic deeds 'en perpetua memoria'; later, the phrase is repeated to mark the transition to Montalvo's musings on his own work: 'E yo esto considerando' (223). The verbal echo creates an analogy between the antique sages and the modern author, but it does not place them on equal footing, as we shall see. The contemplative act links them across time, just as Montalvo urges his readers to use their present experience as a yardstick with which to evaluate the truth status of recorded events, arguing that the verisimilitude of written history can be judged according to what one sees here and now.

Speaking of Livy, who 'dexó en memoria' singular acts of Roman bravery, he writes: 'ya por nos fueron vistas otras semejantes cosas [...] de guisa que por lo que vimos podemos creer lo que leímos, aunque muy extraño nos parezca' (221–22). Following a brief and incisive critique of those whose works lack any foundation in truth ('cimienta de verdad'; 223), Montalvo picks up the idea, and develops its implications. Supposing, he asks, what we see around us is similar, but morally inferior, to what we know to be fiction, what then? '¿Qué tomaremos de las unas y otras, que algún fruto provechoso nos acarreen?' (223). His answer is to urge us on a reading journey mapped by recollection. We should read beyond the concrete events, whether fiction or historical reality, to the 'buenos exemplos y doctrinas' that lie behind them, and which guarantee our salvation. God's grace is imprinted on our souls, and we should take these readings 'por alas con que

nuestras ánimas suban a la alteza de la gloria para donde fueron criadas' (223). These 'feathered thoughts' move us between the past and present of human history, and wing us on our way back to our place of spiritual origin, which lies outside of time itself.

Against these literary-philosophical considerations, Montalvo places further reflections of a more personal order:

E yo esto considerando, desseando que de mí alguna sombra de memoria quedasse, no me atreviendo a poner el mi flaco ingenio en aquello que los más cuerdos sabios se ocuparon, quísele juntar con estos postrimeros que las cosas más livianas y de menor substancia escrivieron. (1987–88: 223–24)

His combined modesty and desire for fame lead him to align himself not with historians but with writers of fiction ('cosas más livianas'). Yet this desire to perpetuate his own memory, in however shadowy a form, is inextricably bound up in preserving poorly remembered and forgotten texts. He corrects the three books of *Amadís* 'que por falta de los malos escritores, o componedores, muy corruptos y viciosos se leían', and adds a fourth, and concludes with his emended translation of *Las Sergas de Esplandián*, 'que hasta aquí no es en memoria de ninguna ser visto', since it had lain buried in a dark tomb until a Hungarian merchant brought it to Spain (224–25). His role as a creative writer is shaped by his activity as a contemplative reader. The corruption that Montalvo corrects is certainly textual, but it is also, perhaps primarily, moral. Previous versions had been related in such a way that 'más por patrañas que por crónicas eran tenidos' (225). As *patrañas*, these versions were ends in themselves, so Montalvo brought out their transcendental potential by adding 'enxemplos y doctrinas'. The resulting books 'con justa causa se podrán comparar a los livianos y febles saleros de corcho, que con tiras de oro y de plata son encarcelados y guarnecidos' (225). This curious image of a salt cellar is a memory cue, which helps us assess and place his work as *refundidor*. It reminds us that Montalvo has created a composite work, a blend of entertainment ('cosas más livianas') and artifice, the common (cork) and the rare (gold and silver), which holds 'salt' – that symbol of piquant wit and preserved wisdom. Not for nothing will this work appeal across generations, 'assí los cavalleros mancebos como los más ancianos'.

These three writers illustrate the medieval commonplace that 'composition starts in memorized reading. The commonest way for a medieval author to depict himself is as a reader of an old book or as a listener to an old story, which he is recalling by retelling' (Carruthers 1990: 191). In her conclusion, Carruthers writes that 'adaptation, the essential conduit of *memoria ad res*, lies at the very basis of medieval literary activity' (259). These truisms help us gloss Montalvo's desire to leave 'alguna sombra de memoria' (223), a phrase that serves as an apt conclusion to these notes. Living in a memorial culture, all three know that the memories of future readers will secure a literary afterlife (whether they actively seek it or not), just as the genesis of their own writing lay in recollection. And yet there is also a note of anxiety. They composed when printing was generating new technologies of memory, and hence new, less homogeneous, relations between

authors, books, and readers. Indeed, the very meaning of these last three terms began to change, with the emergence, however gradual and uneven, of the idea of national literatures and their canons of modern classics, whose lives and *oeuvres* were documented and copiously annotated (Dante, Petrarch, Mena, Garcilaso).⁶ If Montalvo was ambivalent about his fate it was not because of diffidence, but because he recognized that you could not (as Rojas also understood) predict other people's readings and memories: an inevitability famously illustrated by one later author, whose creative recollection of chivalric romances also includes (if memory serves) a wilful act of forgetting: 'En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme ...'.

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6 For a convenient introduction see Bennett (2005).