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Hermes' Ears
Places and Symbols of Communication in Ancient Culture

*Every god has his own style. Mercury, for example has little wings on his feet. He is a Nepman and a rogue.*


Communication has its places—and these are also, or above all, symbolic. Inhabitants of the modern world inevitably tend to associate communication with the telephone, the fax machine, the computer keyboard, the television or the radio. These are undeniably technical, powerful "places"; but most of all, they are places removed from the human body and its topography. The same is true of memory and its counterpart, forgetfulness, two spheres of human experience that are intimately associated with communication. In fact, when we imagine where memory is "located," our modern experience most often suggests the image of one of the many written and electronic archives that we have amassed. Writing, in other words—along with that deceptive transformation of writing, visual or vocal "recording"—has long held us in its power: for us, even what is spoken becomes "written" once it has been recorded and our fleeting visual experiences—shows, exhibitions, the events we attend—unexpectedly take the form of an archive, a reusable store of information thus resembling a book or document.

Symbolically speaking, as well, our own experience of communication has been dissociated from human physicality and transformed into a kind of “bodiless” communication: ears, tongue and memory (which, along with forgetfulness, is located “somewhere” inside of us) have all ended up outside of us, living an almost autonomous existence. Entrusted to the telephone and to the Internet, communication among human beings has become more and more frequently detached from physical interaction. Even silence—when it occurs!—is no longer a palpable void that surrounds us and muffles conversation: it is the phone line going dead, the television blinking off into noiseless darkness or the computer terminal failing to connect.

But it was not always so.

The Lord of Communication

In the market-square of Pharae in Achaea stood the stone image of a bearded Hermes. Before it, an altar, also of stone, was adorned with bronze lamps held in place by lead stays. This statue had prophetic powers and according to Pausanias the ritual prescribed for consulting the god was this: if someone wished to ask something of Hermes, he was to come at evening, burn incense on the altar, fill the lamps with oil and light them. Leaving a coin on the altar on the right side of the statue, he was to whisper his question into the god’s ears. He was then to quit the square, holding his hands over his ears. Once outside, he was to remove his hands from his ears, and whatever voice he heard in that instant he was to interpret prophetically.

The Greeks referred to the practice of divination in which words heard on the breeze were attributed predictive value by the term klēdonismos (“divination by means of klēdōn”). The word klēdōn (< kleō, “to tell of”) in turn denotes a “sound” or “voice” that someone perceives by chance, an omen in the form of a word or rumor that circulates through the air of its own accord, revealing the will of the gods. Divination by means of oblative signs was not exclusive to Greece, however. Other Mediterranean and non-Mediterranean peoples were also familiar with this practice; it was long practiced in the folkloric traditions of Europe, for example. The Romans, for their part, held vocal omena in great esteem, considering them equally prophetic as voices caught out of thin air—candid, involuntary phrases that contained

5. On the Mesopotamian egirrā, see Bottéro 1974.
a profound and often crucial message for the person to whom they were addressed.6

In all such cases, it was simply a question of knowing how to recognize the supernatural significance of such voices—how to apprehend and then interpret these “words.” Crassus, for example, failed to understand that the man on the quay of the port of Brundisium hawking Caunian figs by yelling “Cauneas!” was not simply advertising his goods. The fig seller was actually warning him not to take a sea voyage to his own death by shouting cau’n(e) eae (“do not go!”), using the apocopated pronunciation of the imperative cave (“beware lest . . .”) characteristic of the spoken language.7 Crassus’ mistake, to his misfortune, was that he did not expect a prophecy in this form. In the case of Hermes at Pharae, of course, it was impossible to be caught off guard: the faithful petitioner paid money to consult the oracle; he whispered a specific question in the god’s ear and knew precisely at what moment the klēdōn would come to him.

Looking more closely at the god involved in klēdonismos at Pharae, it appears that Hermes was involved in divination by means of “voices” also outside of this particular context. A phallic herm from Pithanes in Aeolis, for example, bears the inscription Hermēs Klēdonios.8 Hermes’ function as the disseminator of fortuitous messages is not surprising. As the god of chance discovery, anything that anyone happened upon by accident could be referred to in Greek as “a gift of Hermes” (hermaion),9 and Hermes also played a role in the ancient practice of casting lots, where meaningful “randomness” was of central importance.10 It is all the more understandable, then, that the market square—the realm of Hermes—was used as a place in which to receive prophetic klēdones: the market was naturally filled with people speaking and shouting, and Greeks generally appear to have paid much attention to sumbola there.11 The market square was in fact a place of exchange and encounter in every respect, corresponding fully to the nature of Hermes, god of the market, passages, open spaces, exchange and commerce.12

6. For the etymology of omen, see Benveniste 1962, 10ff. On the divinatory characteristics of the vocal omen, see Bouché-Leclercq 1882, IV, 77ff. and Bloch 1963, 79ff.
7. This famous case is reported by Cic. Div. 2.84. For the phonetics, see Hofmann 1936.
9. Cf., e.g., Soph. Ant. 397; Plat. Phaed. 107c; Symm. 176c; Gorg. 486e, etc. Brown 1990, 39ff. interprets this expression as a vestige of the practice of “silent trade” known elsewhere in ancient Greece—a type of exchange practiced in absentia, in which one of the two partners leaves an object in a certain place, the other coming to collect it later, leaving his payment in its place.
11. Cf. the fragment of the comic poet Philemon cited by Clem. Alex. Strom. 7.4.25 (= Poet. Com. Graec. fr. 100 Kassel-Austin), and see Halliday 1967, 230 n. 2.
12. See the discussion of Vernant 1965c. For an original prospective on how Hermes’ “space”
Hermes, in short, was the god of circulation and everything circulated around him: coins, prophetic signs, merchandise, encounters, klēdones. In Greek religious thought, Hermes might be said to represent what today we might define more prosaically by the term “communication”: He was the herald (kērux) and messenger (angelos), functioning as a kind of channel for communication between the transmitter and addressee of a certain message. Accustomed as we are to carrying telephones in our pockets, we easily forget that in antiquity such methods of long-distance communication corresponded to the figure of the angelos, the kērux, the nuntius and the orator. Hermes was the religious representation of all this.

As the god of communication, a specific and—from our point of view—significant part of the body was sacred to Hermes in antiquity: the tongue. As the philosopher Cornutus (Comp. p. 21) says, Hermes “is called the messenger (diaktoros) because . . . he leads (diagein) our thoughts to the souls (psuchai) of those near us: for this reason, they consecrate the tongue to him.” This unambiguously religious association of Hermes with the organ of vocal articulation places the god squarely in the camp of one of the most fundamental aspects of human interaction: linguistic communication. Plato sustains that Hermes “has to do with language (logos)” and that for this reason he should be called “Eiremes,” from eirein (“to say”). In Hesiod, we find the story of how Hermes endowed Pandora with “lies, devious speech, a mischievous nature” and above all “a voice.” The Roman scholar Macrobius described Mercury as “in control of the voice and, indeed, of speech” (vocis et sermonis potentem).

From this perspective, it is interesting to note that for Cornutus Hermes literally was “the word” (logos), and all his other attributes derive from this fundamental characteristic. We have already seen Hermes diaktoros functioning as a kind of linguistic vector. His “penetrating” and “perspicuous” nature is also emphasized, as well as his “swiftness in vocal articulation”—the same features that characterize effective linguistic communication. In Cornutus’ interpretation, linguistic exchange dominates all of Hermes’ other roles: he is the “herald” (kērux) because “by means of a sonorous voice (phōnē) all that is signified through language reaches the ears” and the “messenger”

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(angelos) because “we know the will of the gods from the meanings (ennoiai) that are brought to us through language.” Even Hermes’ most customary attribute—his winged shoes—refers to language, since this “accords with the fact that words are said to be ‘winged’ (pteroenta).” Hermes, then, is the religious category of “conversation” in all its forms.

Aelian also considered Hermes the father of language, but because his work concerned the nature of animals, he considered it worth mentioning what animal most directly represented (the Egyptian) Hermes in his linguistic function: the ibis. Aelian remarks that this bird, which was particularly dear to the god, “resembles the nature of language in its appearance (eidos): its black feathers can be compared to a kind of silent language directed inwards; its white feathers, to language that is directed outwards and heard by others, like a kind of servant and messenger of what exists inside.”

Language, like Hermes, is a messenger: its function is to bring “inside” and “outside” into communication. However, the ibis’ feathers neatly characterize language not only because they represent the human communicative faculty as the vector of some hidden “inner world.” The image of its black and white plumage also captures the notion that language has a “black” and a “white” side—that silence and introversion are just as much a part of language as articulated speech.

Aelian speaks of “black” and “white” feathers, but the analogy between the ibis and language is not limited to its plumage. Aristotle mentioned a popular belief that “crows and ibises join in sexual union with the mouth, and among quadrupeds the weasel gives birth through its mouth. Anaxagoras says this, as well as some other natural philosophers, but he discusses it only very superficially and without reflection.” Aelian also discusses the belief that the ibis performs coitus orally, adding that this bird not only conceives but also gives birth through the mouth.

In view of the analogy between the weasel and the ibis as animals that “give birth through the mouth,” it is interesting to note that Plutarch also discusses the weasel as a symbol of language. Explaining why the Egyptians venerated the asp, the weasel and the scarab, he notes that “many believe that
the weasel conceives through the ears and gives birth through its mouth and that this is an image of the origin of language.” 23 Language has its origin in the mouth and ears: in this sense, the weasel, whose reproductive cycle goes “from mouth to ear,” is an excellent representation of this human phenomenon. We do not know if the ibis belonged to the realm of speech because of its reproductive habits: Aelian only mentions the color of its feathers. The close association of this bird with language appears to be reinforced, however, by similar beliefs about the weasel.

The symbolic role that birds play in connection with Hermes as the god of language is worth exploring. As the conveyor of spoken language and guide of the flow of words from tongue to ears, Hermes was believed also to have invented the letters of the alphabet and revealed to men how to capture “flighty” vocal expressions in fixed signs. 24 In one of his mythographic resumés, Hyginus recounts how the idea of the alphabet occurred to the god: “Some say that it was Mercury [who invented letters], from the flight of cranes, which when they fly express the letters of the alphabet” (alii dicunt Mercurium ex gruum volatu, quae cum volant litteras exprimunt). 25 Dante resorted to a similar comparison in describing the wailing host of lecherous men that approached him as cranes that fly “forming long lines in the air.” 26 The flight of the crane is graphical, then, just as the ibis’ plumage is oral.

The ibis’ oral character manifests itself in a system of simple oppositions: black/white, speech/silence. The crane’s “graphiness,” however, depends on a rather more complex articulation of the wings and the body, which together are capable of forming the set of graphemes necessary for writing. It is only a mythographic fantasy, of course, that the flight of birds put the idea of litterae into men’s minds. This fantasy, moreover, was possible only when the concept of writing so pervaded the world of mental representations that even the manner in which birds fly could be imagined as “alphabetic”: men looked to the sky and there too observed lines of writing.

The notion that avian flight patterns could function as a written code was probably also suggested by the divinatory practice of “reading” such patterns. If birds were capable of transmitting signa in their features and through the patterns they made in the sky, why could this not also function as a true and proper alphabet? This idea—that the flight of birds was able to inscribe “winged words”—represents a striking paradox: “wings,” like those

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of Hermes’ sandals, both carry words away and fix them permanently in writing. But Hermes, god of language and communication, is always there.

Focusing on the ritual at Pharae again, one thing in particular strikes our attention: the consistency with which a certain symbolic value is assigned to a part of the body that functions as a kind of complement to the tongue—that is, to the ears. The petitioner poses his question by whispering directly into the god’s ear, while he protects himself from receiving false or useless omens by covering his ears with his hands. He chooses the right moment for receiving the klédōn by then freeing his hands from them. Hermes, god of the tongue, thus takes on another role as god of the ears. Perhaps not coincidentally, Hermes could be represented in the act of “covering his ears” with his hands:27 Apollo besets Hermes with accusations and in response, the child-god utters two typical acoustic “omens” (oiōnai): he burps loudly and sneezes.28 “By dint of such omens,” Apollo declares, he will surely find his stolen cows—and it will be Hermes to show him the way. Hermes then leaps to his feet and runs off, “covering his ears”—precisely the same sequence of gestures that the petitioner at Pharae performs when he takes his leave of the god’s statue. Another aspect of the cult of Hermes refers to his ears and their communicative function: At Athens, there was a statue dedicated to Hermes Psithuristēs, “The Whisperer.”29 According to Pausanias,30 Hermes received this epithet “because men who gather there hold secret discourses and whisper to each other whatever they want to say.”31 Hermes could be represented explicitly as the god of whispering—i.e., “speaking in the ear”—thus receiving in the form of an epithet what the petitioner at Pharae addressed to him in practice.

Hermes’ relationship with “ears” fits his role as the god of language, since communication can only occur, as the French proverb goes, de la bouche à l’oreille: both organs are necessarily to the process.32 Plutarch’s symbolism of the weasel demonstrates this neatly; he also asserts that the ears of gossip-mongers “do not communicate with the soul, but with the tongue. For this

27. Hom. Hymn. in Merc. 305ff. The text is difficult to interpret, however: see the note in Cassola 1975, 532ff.
31. Cf. Eust. ad Hom. Od. 20.8; Usener 1948, 267 n. 5. For Brown 1990, 14ff., Hermes’ “whisper” relates to the god’s characteristic magical abilities (in magic, the whisper has an important role).
32. In Mesopotamian culture, the ears were considered the site of intellectual progress: cf. the “divinations with four ears” discussed by Bottéro 1982, 131.
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reason, the words that most people are able to hold on to when they hear
them, gossipmongers let slip away.”

The mouth and the ears are so closely
connected that the god who oversees communication necessarily deals with
both.

Linguistic acts do not, however, consist solely in the emission of sound
and auditory reception (As a symbol of language the weasel thus represents
an ideal interpretation of communication): beyond speaking and listening,
understanding and interpreting messages are also necessary components of
the process of communication. These also fell within the purview of Hermes.
Again according to Cornutus, the fact that Hermes’ mother was named Maia
was supposed to mean that “the word (logos) is the foundation of speculation
(theōria) and research (zētēsis).” In fact, wet-nurses are called maiai because
they bring babies into the light, just as happens in an investigation (ereuna).”
Hermes, then, was also the god of research and investigation.

Beyond Cornutus’ speculations, it is interesting that Hermes’ own name
was connected with words such as hermēneus, hermēneia, and hermēneuein,
which all refer to interpretation and translation from one language to anoth-
er. As the god of interpretation and translation, Hermes established com-
munication not only in commercial exchange, but also when translating
from one language or culture to another. The same relationship between
commercial and linguistic mediation is captured by the Latin term inter-
pres, which properly referred to the mediator of business transactions;
an interpres was the person who established a “price” (-pres) “between” (inter-)
two parties. The linguistic “interpreter” was thus equivalent to the mediat-
ing figure that assisted two parties in concluding commercial transactions
by negotiating a price.

Hermes’ function at Pharae can be reconsidered within the perspective
of the relationship between translation and the world of the market, as well.
Through the “voices” and “sounds” of the market, Hermes established com-
munication between men and gods (or more exactly, between men and their
destiny). Translating Fate into a klēdōn, he allowed men to understand the
obscure will of the gods and, in doing so, achieved what was perhaps the
most difficult type of communication. As Cicero says, when the gods speak

744a and Pettine 1992, 126.
34. Corn. Comp. p. 23.
35. Cf. Bosshartd 1942, 36ff. Note that in Plato (Crat. 407c), Hermes is explicitly defined as
“interpreter” (hermēneus). Chantraine 1968, 373 doubts this etymological connection; cf. Krahe
1939, 175ff., esp. 181.
36. Cf., e.g., Plaut. Curc. 434, quod te presente isti egī, teque interprete; Cic. Fam. 10.11.3,
utor in hac re adiutoribus interpretibusque fratre meo et Laterense et Eurnio nostro. Cf. Ernout-
to us and we are not able to understand them, they are like “Carthaginians or Spaniards that come to speak to us in the Senate without an interpreter” (Poeni aut Hispani in senatu nostro loquerentur sine interprete).\(^{37}\) They speak a foreign language, in other words—and Hermes, god of mediation, has to translate.

Hermes stands at the very center of discourse. The entire process of communication—speaking and hearing, the mouth and the ear—constellates around him. Above all, he is at the center of the most delicate part of the linguistic operation: interpretation. To use Aelian’s imagery, Hermes has the ability to turn the ibis’ black feathers white, to make explicit what was implicit, and to bring “out” what might otherwise have remained “in.” It is perhaps surprising, then, to see Hermes implicated in a moment that seems, at least at first glance, to involve the opposite of spoken discourse: the moment, that is, when linguistic communication fails just as it has begun.

**Hermes Is in the Building**

The Messenger arrived unexpectedly. In the commotion of the wedding feast, he appeared like any of the others among the crowd of guests, and so the drinkers failed to notice the god’s mysterious entrance. Hugging his divinity close like a drenched cloak, he blended into the throng of revelers as he passed:

... Aber plötzlich sah
mithin im Sprechen einer von den Gästen
den jungen Hausherrn oben an dem Tische
wie in die Höh gerissen, nicht mehr liegend,
und überall und mit dem ganzen Wesen
ein Fremdes spiegelnd, das ihn furchtbar ansprach.
Und gleich darauf, als klärte sich die Mischung,
war Stille; nur mit einem Satz am Boden
von trüebem Lärm und einem Niederschlag
fallenden Lallens, schon verdorben riechend
nach dumpfem umgestandenem Gelächter.
Und da erkannten sie den schlanken Gott,
und wie er dastand ...
But suddenly
one of the guests, among the conversations
saw the young master of the house at the head of the table
as if, no longer lying there, he had risen up on high
and all about and with all his being
mirrored something strange and frightening that spoke to him.
And as soon as the confusion had cleared,
was there silence; with only the remains on the ground
of a gloomy din and an echo
of dying murmurs, already tainted
that stank of deaf laughter restrained.
And then he recognized the swift god,
and how he stood . . .

This is the marriage feast of Admetus, and Hermes the Messenger has entered the room to announce to the young groom that he must die. When? At once. The god’s entrance was discreet, but his appearance was no less frightening for that. What is most striking in Rilke’s lines, in fact, is the perfect coincidence of the god’s epiphany and the sudden descent of silence upon the room. The change that has come over Admetus (who already makes his way out the banquet as if enchanted by “something strange and frightening that spoke to him”) is noticed by one the guests “among the conversations” that echo throughout the room. When the confusion clears, a great silence predominates (“und bald . . . war Stille”), which the echo of dying laughter and confused murmurs only makes more oppressive. Now Hermes is there and everyone knows it.

In constructing the opening of his celebrated Alkestis, it is hard to imagine that Rilke did not have in mind Plutarch’s assertion that “when in some gathering silence suddenly descends, they say that Hermes has entered the room.” The modern poet has written a work of poetry that is objectively Greek and a Plutarchean proverb, dramatized in the form of a story, gives Admetus’ German wedding its tragic atmosphere. There is nothing forced in any of this, though. Greeks or no Greeks, it is distressing when, for no apparent reason, conversation fails and silence descends upon a group of people who previously had been engaged in lively chatter. It is as if the unexpected break in conversation suggested the entrance of the supernatural. The total synchrony of events, perhaps, creates the suspicion that “something strange” has insinuated itself among us. Even today in France, Germany and England people commonly declare in similar situations that “an angel has

passed”; in Christian culture, the messenger of the Lord assumes the role of Hermes, the winged messenger, but the substance has not changed. The winged Christian angel conveys a silence of equal foreboding.

In ancient Rome, sudden silences at banquets were considered ominous: “It has been remarked,” Pliny writes, “that the participants at a feast may suddenly fall silent, but only if the banqueters are of an even number. In such circumstances, everyone’s reputation is at risk” (Plin. Nat. hist. 28.27). Pliny relates this “sudden silence” to the fact that somewhere someone is “speaking badly” of the guests (isque famae labor est), almost as if a malevolent voice besmirching the good reputation of the guests possessed the strange power of being able to halt conversation from afar.

Rilke was a master of supernatural silences. By the time dessert was served at Urnekloster’s dinner, for example, the ghost of Cristina Brahe had “crossed through the room already deserted . . . through an indescribable silence, in which was only heard the tinkling of a glass” (“durch den nun freigewordenen Raum vorüberging . . . durch unbeschreibliche Stille, in der nur irgendwo ein Glas zitternd klirrte”). Here, too, a trace of sound—a tinkling like the muffled murmurs in Alkestis—only makes the silence more terrifying:

“Wer ist das?” schrie mein Vater dazwischen.
“Jemand, der wohl das Recht hat, hier zu sein. Keine Fremde. Christine Brahe.”—Da entstand wieder jene merkwürdig dünne Stille, und wieder fing das Glas an zu zittern.

“Who is it?” shouted my father, interrupting my grandfather.
“Someone who has every right to be here. Not a stranger. Christine Brahe.” Then that strange silence returned and the glass began to tremble again.

Silence is a mark of the dead. In the afterlife, no one speaks, and anyone of that realm—Hermes, an angel of the Lord, the ghost of Cristina Brahe—necessarily causes conversation to fail. In fact, death itself is absolute silence: this is why Hermes, represented as the psuchopompos (“escort of

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39. On the folkloric beliefs concerning “sudden silences,” see Wolters 1935, 95; Deonna and Renard 1994, 110ff. Frazer 1911, II, 299) records that in Bavaria at the moment in which conversation fails there is the custom of saying, “Someone has crossed their legs.”
40. Plin. Nat. hist. 28.27.
41. See Deonna and Renard 1994, 120.
42. The passage is difficult to interpret. According to Wolters 1935, 93ff., sudden silence was believed to signal the arrival of hostile demons. See also Deonna and Renard 1994, 119.
souls”), radiates the silence characteristic of the world beyond. If Hermes is in the building, gloomy quiet prevails, just as conversation that takes place between and with the gods is by definition silent.

This consideration only partially explains Plutarch’s proverb (The meaning of a proverb is always richer and fuller than the explanation some unilateral interpretation provides). The complexity of Hermes’ own nature—as the god of voices, the tongue, the ears and linguistic communication in general—permits a better understanding of the meaning of the silence provoked by the god’s unexpected arrival. The fact is that Hermes, the lord of all communication, controls both speech and silence: to use Aelian’s metaphor, both the ibis’ white and black feathers are in his power. In fact, when Macrobius described Mercury as “in control of the voice and speech,” he must also have meant to refer to his power over silence—to his ability not to grant the voice or speech.

Speaking aloud and remaining silent are two faces of the same coin, and Hermes displays them both. This is why Hermes, as the god of thieves, makes dogs fall silent at the dark of night, truly behaving as the “Dog Strangler” (kunanchēs), as his epithet indicates. Hermes had demonstrated this ability at the very beginning of his career, when, as a child, he stole Apollo’s cows. The little thief reentered his mother’s cave “without the dogs barking”; nor “did he make any sound as normally happens when touching the ground.” Hermes “had launched upon the dogs that guarded them an attack of lethargy and kunanchē.” The kunanchē that Hermes inflicts upon the dogs is a kind of “sore throat” that keeps them from barking, as if strangled. In other words, just as it lies in Hermes’ power to grant the capacity to speak, so too he can take it away.

43. Deonna and Renard 1994, 120ff.
44. Cic. Div. 1.129 observed that “the spiritual faculties (animi) of the gods perceive reciprocally without eyes, ears or tongue that which each experiences (for which reason, men, even when the express a desire or a wish in silence, do not doubt that the gods here them). See Scarpi 1983, 31–50, esp. 36.
45. Hipponax fr. 2.1 Degani, with a rich apparatus of further evidence. On the dog in Greek culture, see Franco 2000.
47. Similar is the “silence” and “deafness” that the small thief asks of the old man who has seen him pass by Apollo’s cows: “having heard me, be deaf, and say not a word” (92ff.). The text also alludes to the conspiratorial behavior of the thief: “I did not see, I know nothing, I did not hear others speak of it; I could not tell you” (263ff.).
49. Kunanchē is a term used to indicate a disease of the throat characteristic of dogs (Arist. Anim. 604a; Ael. Nat. animal. 4.40) as well as angina in human beings (Corp. Hipp. 2.7.16 Littré, etc.).
Let us follow this thematic thread. In Latin, a specific expression was used to indicate the unexpected arrival of someone in the middle of a conversation about that very person: *lupus in fabula* ("the wolf in the tale"). The grammarian Pompeius explains: "You are speaking about someone and this person suddenly shows up. You say: *lupus in fabula.*" This expression has many parallels in both ancient and modern languages, and these too often involve the "wolf": in Greek, there was "If you only mention the wolf . . . ," with the same meaning as *lupus in fabula,* while medieval Europe knew the saying *mentio si fiet, saepe lupus veniet.* An adage known in Tuscany is "chi ha il lupo in bocca, l'ha sulla groppa" ("who has the wolf in his mouth, has it on his back"), while in France it is "quand on parle du loup, on en voit la queue" and in Germany, "wenn man den Wolf nennt, so kommt er gerennt."

These expressions correspond to the traditional prescription never to name malicious or dangerous beings in order to avoid their sudden appearance. Similar proverbs have the devil in the role of the wolf: cf. "speak of the devil, and horns will sprout." In Spain, the wolf or devil appears to be substituted by another, equally malevolent figure in the proverbial saying, "en nombrando el ruin de Roma, luego asoma." This is similar to the Italian "persona trista, nominata e vista," while in China a figure known as General Cao Cao fulfills this function in the proverb "shuo Caocao, Caocao jiu dao" ("when you speak of Cao Cao, he comes immediately"). From this comparative evidence, we may infer that at Rome the expression *lupus in fabula* was employed to mean that the person who suddenly appeared had actually been summoned into the conversation simply by naming them. This was

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53. Walter 1964, n. 14777. With small stylistic differences, the same proverb recurs also in n. 8628, 23503, 27174 and 30312.

54. Arthaber 1989, 364ff. In modern Greek, there is also the proverb *kata phoné kai ho gaidaros,* in which "the donkey" (ho gaidaros) replaces "the wolf."

55. Otto 1890, 199ff. For the prohibition against "naming" the wolf, cf. Peuckert 1987, 9, 782ff.

56. For the "ruin de Roma," see Arthaber 1989, 364ff. "Ruin" means "wretch, trickster, crafty old devil," etc. For the etymology of this expression and its most ancient evidence (also proverbial), see Corominas 1954, 4, 86ff. For the Chinese proverb, see Mathews 1972, 884: Cao Cao was a powerful general of the 2nd c. ce who, in later traditions, became the incarnation of evil itself.
most likely the origin of the proverb, though this observation merits greater amplification.

All these beliefs and proverbs presume the curious notion that simply speaking about someone actually involves them in conversation (if only partially and imperfectly). Something similar occurs in the *Iliad*, when, returning from their celebrated “Night Raid,” Odysseus and Diomedes appear in the Achaean camp at the precise moment that Nestor had been speaking of them: “The conversation was not but finished, and already they had arrived.”57 The notion that speaking about someone effectively brings about the appearance of that individual is clear in the Roman belief we have already cited above from Pliny: evidently, the sudden onset of silence was attributed to the fact that, somewhere, someone was slandering those sitting at the banquet (*is que famae labor est*).

In these circumstances, the person who constitutes the topic of conversation is obviously outside the conversation. Nevertheless, he or she perceives what is happening in the distant conversation by means of the silence that occurs within the present (that is, in-progress) conversation in which he or she is currently involved. It is almost as if the “present” conversation were being interrupted by a “distant” conversation in which one of the (present) participants has become the (distant) subject of conversation. This interruption, however, is not the same as entering into another circle of communication: the person being spoken about in the “distant” conversation simply stops communicating with his or her interlocutors in the “present” conversation, without actually entering into communication with those who are speaking about him.

Pliny records another Roman belief that seems to suggest the same thing: “it is commonly held that people can perceive when they are being talked about by others by a ringing in their ears” (*quin et absentes tinnitu aurium praesentire sermones de se receptum est*).58 This belief still circulates in some modern societies in proverbial form, although the Roman “ringing” has been substituted by “buzzing” or “humming.”59 Here, the individual who is the (distant) topic of conversation senses a kind of disturbance in their

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57. Hom. *Il.* 10.540. This comparison was made by Erasmus (*Ad.* 2.5.50).
59. Statements of the type “orecchia manca, parola franca; orecchia destra, parola mal detta” (in Zeppini Bolelli 1989, 122), implying that either the right or the left ear buzzes depending on whether the person is being spoken of “well” or “badly,” are already ancient: see Wolters 1935, 49 and Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (V, XXIII, 6) in Wilkin 1852, II, 82: “When our cheek burneth or ear tingleth, we usually say that somebody is talking of us. . . . Which is a conceit hardly to be made out without the concession of a signifying genius, or universal Mercury, conducting sounds unto their distant subjects, and teaching us to hear by touch.”
own (present) communication, as if they had somehow been attracted into a conversation in which they cannot, however, fully participate. Thus they perceive only a vague sensation of that remote discourse.

In such cases, we might say that only the phatic function of communication has been activated: the “ringing” or “buzzing” signals that a channel of communication with another conversation has opened, but no effective message can be transmitted along this channel. Nevertheless, speaking about someone distant seems to produce a kind of sympathy with them. In some way, this act draws them into the present conversation, as in the case of lupus in fabula—even if in this instance the attraction towards the conversation in progress is so strong that the person does actually appear.

Let us try, then, to disentangle the cultural web of which lupus in fabula is only the first strand. Behind it, there is not only the belief that, once named, a malignant creature (the wolf, the devil) suddenly appears, but also the more general conviction that speaking about someone establishes a kind of sympathetic relationship with that person, and that even if they do not appear, nevertheless they perceive their role as the topic of conversation. These cultural models form the foundation of lupus in fabula.

The origin of a proverb is one thing; its manner of signification is another. A proverb is in fact a refined semiotic mechanism, whose operation may be schematized as follows: the proverb expresses a certain (“logical” or “real”) situation, which is invariable, through a set of images, which may vary infinitely; for example, as Greimas notes, the situation “act before it is too late” may be expressed through the set of images that includes expressions such as “strike while the iron is hot” (Europe), “shape the chalk while it is soft” (Swahili) and “cook the gourd while the fire is hot” (ancient Hebrew).

In the case of lupus in fabula, the situation that is being expressed is “the person about whom we have been speaking has just arrived,” while the set of images used to express this situation includes the arrival of the wolf, the devil, the ruin de Roma, the persona trista and so on. To begin our analysis of lupus in fabula, therefore, we will look at the (variable and varied) images used to express it, rather than dwelling upon the (invariable) situation expressed by the proverb. And this set of images prompts an immediate

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61. I use the categories of Permiakov 1979, 163–79. Greimas (1974, 325) attributes a similar semiotic function to the proverb when he insisted on the “connotative” character of proverbial language, meaning by this “the transfer of meaning from one semantic place (that intended by the signifier) to another.”
question: When the person about whom we have been speaking suddenly appears, why do we consider this situation so disturbing that we express it through the image of a wolf or the devil?

Another Tuscan proverb that is still in use today to mean that the person who suddenly appears was just “on the tongue” of the interlocutors, appears to employ a slightly less troubling image: “se eri un fico, eri in bocca” (“if you were a fig, you would be in my mouth”). The image should not mislead us, though; the proverb actually sets up the poor person who suddenly appears on the scene as about to be “eaten” by the speakers. Here, then, it is not the person who is being spoken about that inspires fear, but the interlocutors themselves.

The two types of proverb that we have now seen—one that assimilates the person being spoken about to a wolf or the devil, and one that likens him to a fig in the mouth of the interlocutors—appear to function symmetrically. The situation remains unchanged, but the images used to express that situation orient its meaning in opposite directions. In the first case, the speakers are threatened by the unexpected arrival of the person they have been speaking about, while in the second, the person who has been the subject of conversation finds himself at the mercy of those who have been speaking about him. But why should this specific situation be the cause of so much anxiety that it comes to be expressed proverbially through such unsettling images?

To answer this question, let us consider the connection between *lupus in fabula* and the theme of “unexpected silence.” When the person being spoken about actually appears, it is clear that dialogue cannot continue as before; it must in some sense be interrupted. Commenting on a passage of Terence in which the expression *lupus in fabula* appears, the grammarian Aelius Donatus suggests an interesting linkage between this situation and sudden silences:

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**LUPUS IN FABULA:** silentii indictio est in hoc proverbio, et eiusmodi silentii, vel in ipso verbo ut ipsa fabula conticescat, quia lupum vidisse homines dicimus, qui repente obmutuerunt; quod fere his evenit, quos prior viderit lupus, ut cum cogitatione in qua fuerint etiam verbis et voce careant.⁶³

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seen the wolf." This occurs to those whom the wolf sees first, that they are left without words and without voice in the middle of a thought.

According to Donatus, *lupus in fabula* relates to a belief that the wolf, coming upon someone unexpectedly, robs them of their ability to speak. The wolf, then, is capable of producing “sudden silence” in the same way Hermes’ entrance into a room does. Here, however, the fearsome, disturbing creature that causes silence is not a god but an animal, and—significantly—this animal’s power to bring about silences resides in its gaze. That is, if a wolf furtively casts his glance upon someone, that person will be unable to express whatever it is that they had in mind at that moment.

Again, the situation presupposed by *lupus in fabula* always remains the same—“the person we were talking about has arrived”—but the range of images used metaphorically to express this situation has increased. According to Aelius Donatus’ explanation, the sudden arrival of the person being spoken of interrupts the conversation at its middle by depriving the speaker of his voice, as if he were under the spell of the wolf’s bewitching gaze. Scholars have normally rejected this interpretation of the proverb in favor of one based on the prohibition of naming the wolf or the devil in order to prevent its appearance. There is no need to choose one or the other, however. As a creation of folklore, a proverb is capable of sustaining the coexistence of diverse models of belief in its imagery. Donatus’ explanation expands the set of images used by the proverb and, in doing so, further clarifies its meaning. By referring to the enchanting powers of the wolf to rob someone of their voice, *lupus in fabula* is capable of expressing the belief not only that the spoken-of person appears at the sound of his name, but also that his appearance brings silence down upon the interlocutors. The full sense of the proverb encapsulates both meanings: “If you speak of the wolf, the wolf appears and takes away your voice,” and this is a figurative way of saying, “we are speaking about someone, and when they appear we must be quiet.” At any rate, rejecting Donatus’ explanation out of hand is untenable for another reason: the ancient sources concur in their appeal to the theme of the wolf’s gaze to explain the proverb’s origin.

Donatus’ interpretation of *lupus in fabula* only reinforces the disconcerting nature of the images used to express this situation. Arriving on the
scene, the person being spoken of not only acts like the wolf (i.e., appearing when named), but also possesses a kind of bewitching gaze that robs the speaker of his or her voice. Relating this proverb to beliefs about the wolf’s gaze, Servius makes this connection explicit: “The natural philosophers also confirm that the voice is robbed from whomever it [sc. the wolf] has seen first. From this comes the proverb *lupus in fabula*, which is used whenever the person being spoken of arrives and by his presence cuts off the ability to speak” *(etiam physici confirmat, quod vox detrabitur ei, qui primum viderit. unde etiam proverbium natum est ‘lupus in fabula,’ quotiens supervenit ille, de quo loquimur, et nobis sui praesentia amputat facultatem loquendi).*

66 Appearing in the middle of a conversation of which he has been the subject, the intruder—like the wolf’s gaze—terminates all communication on the spot. From this we may conclude that *lupus in fabula* presupposes a situation in which the spoken-of person sees the interlocutors first, catching them in the act of speaking about him. It is almost as if he was already there; perhaps he has heard what was being said about him. Because the interlocutors cannot know how much the interloper has heard, they are in a position of weakness. This is the first reason for the disturbing character of this communicative situation.

Upon the interloper’s arrival, conversation must end; otherwise embarrassment ensues. The interlocutors are compelled to be quiet and to interrupt the conversation even in mid-word, if necessary. From this perspective, the situation of *lupus in fabula* partly resembles that of aposiopesis or *reticentia*. As for the concrete progression of this interruption, however, *lupus in fabula* seems to offer two possibilities:

a) Silence falls spontaneously, as if the wolf had seen the interlocutors first;

b) Silence does not fall spontaneously, and then, to revive the conversation, the proverb is recited.

Donatus identifies an interesting aspect of the proverb in this regard,

66. Serv. ad Ecl. 9.54.
67. Aposiopesis involves the interruption of a phrase already begun and the onset of a silence or pause. There are differences, however: while the silence introduced by aposiopesis presupposes the presence of some kind of internal block (intense emotion, fear of breaking the rules of social control, etc.), the silence of *lupus in fabula* assumes the existence of an external block (the person who appears). Moreover, aposiopesis does not strictly interrupt communication, as it may first appear: rather, it maintains and in fact intensifies communication by recourse to the instrument of silence. *Lupus in fabula*, on the other hand, is a true (and not rhetorical) interruption of the dialogue. On the linguistic, rhetorical, and anthropological function of aposiopesis, see the excellent study of Ricottilli 1984, 13–45.
when he remarks that *lupus in fabula* contains an explicit and immediate “assertion of silence” (*indictio silentii*). The grammarian seems to mean that if silence descends upon the interlocutors at the precise moment in which the interloper appears, it is the proverb itself—pronounced by one of the interlocutors as an “assertion of silence”—that interrupts the conversation. The proverb expresses two things, then: first, what normally happens when the interloper appears and the conversation is interrupted, and second, what must occur when that person arrives. Thus, in addition to its regular descriptive function, *lupus in fabula* also has a performative function.

Not only this. Beyond encapsulating both the statement “silence has descended upon us, because the person we were speaking about has arrived,” *lupus in fabula* has a third dimension of meaning: it also indicates its place in the dialogue. At least in theory, *lupus in fabula* should always be last in a conversation, since its utterance prohibits a response: if the interlocutor responds, he violates the “assertion of silence” that the proverb represents. *Lupus in fabula*, then, necessarily marks the end of one dialogue and the beginning of another—one that involves the newly arrived individual. One further observation. Used in this way, it is obvious that the expression *lupus in fabula* cannot be addressed to the person who was the subject of conversation. If it is the last utterance that the interlocutors exchange in their present dialogue, by necessity it cannot involve the person whose arrival signals the beginning of a new conversation.

Let us now explore the other dimension of the proverb, the image of the fig in the speaker’s mouth. On first consideration, it does not appear that the mere utterance of this expression produces silence, as *lupus in fabula* does. In fact, the situation it defines is quite different. While *lupus in fabula* is the closing utterance of the old dialogue, “if you were a fig, you would be in my mouth” is the opening statement of the new one. Its utterance effectively transforms the interloper into a full-fledged participant of the conversation. As we have said, these two proverbs thus work in complementary fashion: *lupus in fabula* functions as an “assertion of silence” and an effective interruption of conversation, while “if you were a fig, you would be in my mouth” functions as an explicit opening of dialogue. Unlike *lupus in fabula*, which cannot be addressed to the newly arrived individual, “if you were a fig, you would be in my mouth” must be.

Addressing one’s self directly to the new arrival and openly declaring that not moments ago they had been the very topic of conversation naturally presumes great psychological self-assuredness on the part of the interlocutors. In effect, the proverb communicates the following information to the interloper: “We have seen you and we are so sure of our own situation that
we have no difficulty in telling you that we have just been talking about you.” The new arrival may justifiably worry, then: “What could these people have been saying about me? There is nothing to be done about it—whatever they say, I will never know if that is truly what they were saying. I am totally in their hands; in fact, I am in their mouths: ‘if I were a fig, they would be eating me.’”

Both *lupus in fabula* and the situation typified by the proverbial expression “if you were a fig, you would be in my mouth” presuppose a rather curious game between the interlocutors and the person who has been the subject of conversation. As we have seen, this game involves the give and take of gazes, and everything depends on who spots whom first. Its true complexity, moreover, emerges from the density of animal beliefs that furnishes the proverb with its set of images. Isidore of Seville describes what happens in each case: “Concerning the wolf, peasants say that a man loses his voice, if the wolf sees him first. For this reason, when someone suddenly falls silent, we say *lupus in fabula*. On the other hand, if we realize that we have been seen, the wolf loses its bravery and ferocity.” In other words, while the effect of the wolf’s gaze upon man is silence, that of man’s gaze upon the wolf is something else entirely: the animal becomes tame, it “loses its bravery and ferocity.” Projecting this image upon the situation defined by *lupus in fabula*, the interlocutors who catch sight of the interloper and address him openly (“if you were a fig, you would be in my mouth”) correspond to someone who realizes that he has been seen by the wolf; the intruder is tamed—the wolf is no longer frightening and the hunter has become the prey. In such situations, the spoken-of person finds himself in a position of weakness in respect to his interlocutors.

Now that we have considered the images used to encapsulate a certain situation—two people who have been speaking about someone when that person unexpectedly arrives—in the form of a proverb, it is time to consider the situation itself. From a strictly linguistic point of view, this situation is perhaps explicable within the framework of Émile Benveniste’s theory of verbal person, which he developed from the work of Arabic grammarians.

According to these grammarians’ interpretation of grammatical “person,” the first person corresponds to “he who speaks,” the second to “he to whom one addresses one’s self,” and the third to “he who is absent.” Consistently with this formulation, Benveniste suggests that the only “true” grammatical
persons of the verb are the first and second, while the so-called “third person” is in fact a “non-person” represented without any markings of individuality. Transferring this idea to the pronouns, we might say that “I” and “you” are “real” personal pronouns with true referential values, while “he” and “she” refer to the individual about whom one is speaking only as a member of the set of “others.” This is why in some languages the words for “he” and “she” can function as allocutives when the speaker wishes to distance his or her interlocutor in some way, whether out of respect or disdain. By addressing “you” as “he” or “she” (as, for example, in Italian an interlocutor may be addressed as Lei—that is, with a third person pronoun), the interlocutor is in some sense depersonalized, distanced below or above their natural status of “person.” Outside of such cases, it is impossible to address “he” or “she” as “you.” We can speak of “he,” “she” or “it” as the subject of conversation, but we cannot make that third person into a second person. By definition, a “he,” “she” or “it” is absent.

The situation presupposed by both lupus in fabula and “if you were a fig, you would be in my mouth” thus corresponds to the break that occurs when the system of oppositions between “person” and “non-person,” between “those present” and “those absent” falls apart. If the person about whom one is speaking exists necessarily outside of the conversation, what happens when that person unexpectedly appears, penetrating into a linguistic space that does not concern strictly concern them? Communication fails, and conversation is interrupted. In addition to this linguistic observation, our anthropological analysis of the images used for expressing this situation also allows us to describe a state of mind. The situation defined by these proverbial expressions is perceived as so “uncanny” (in Freud’s sense) that it is likened to the arrival of a wolf, to the silence imposed by that animal’s bewitching eye or a kind of metaphorical mastication. The entrance of “he” or “she” into a conversation that concerns “him” or “her,” resulting in the transformation of that “he” or “she” into an interlocutor (a “you”), creates anxiety both in the person speaking about the “he” or “she” and in the “he” or “she” who discovers him- or herself as the subject of the others’ talk. Put in different terms, according to cultural convention the individual as topic of conversation and as personal (grammatical) subject must remain distinct: they must never meet. If they do happen to meet, communication ceases to function and the situation created by this encounter takes on a rather disagreeable and disturbing quality.

The psychic and emotional disturbance caused by such situations probably relates to beliefs about slanderous talk. In these circumstances, silence

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70. Benveniste 1966, 252.
occurs not only because some “other” is being talked about, but because that person is being disparaged. This is similar to the situation described by Freud when he notes that “cultured” men immediately refrain from vulgar speech when a woman enters the room, whereas “in country taverns” the same event prompts scurrilous joking.\(^{71}\) In one ancient source for *lupus in fabula*, the silence imposed upon the original interlocutors is in fact explicitly related to their slanderous talk.\(^{72}\) Moreover, when the proverb appears within “conversational” contexts (rather than metalinguistic discussions), it often appears from the communicative situation that the interloper is being spoken of in categorically negative terms. In one case, the conversation turns on the greedy character of the parasite Gelasimus, who then suddenly shows up;\(^{73}\) in another, Syrus explains how he means to wheedle something skillfully out of the *senex* Demea, who then unexpectedly appears.\(^{74}\) Must we conclude, therefore, that the uneasiness provoked by this kind of situation corresponds only to breakdown of the rules of discretion and decency—that something is being said about someone that could not be said to them directly, and that this inconsistency is perceived as unpleasant and embarrassing for everyone?\(^{75}\)

Such an explanation would be only partial, since slanderous talk is only sporadically associated with the use of *lupus in fabula*. Frequently, the proverb is used in contexts that contain no suggestion whatsoever of maliciousness towards the conversational interloper.\(^{76}\) In fact, only one of the many numerous ancient explanations of this proverb mentions that the spoken-of person was the object of slander; normally, authors do not even mention this possibility.\(^{77}\) Our own linguistic and cultural competence suggests, moreover, that the use of such expressions is independent of libelous intent: the unexpected appearance of the spoken-of person is enough to motivate our use of these conversational formulae.

Disparaging talk therefore appears to occupy an extreme position within the situation defined by *lupus in fabula*, although this position is not always substantially different from that occupied by the simple and neutral fact of “speaking about” another person. Indeed, experience teaches us that we

\(^{71}\) Freud 1972a, 89.


\(^{73}\) Plaut. Stich. 574ff.

\(^{74}\) Ter. Ad. 533ff.

\(^{75}\) In this sense, the situation of *lupus in fabula* is very similar to that presupposed by apophasis (see above, 20n67), when speech is interrupted precisely out of fear of violating some rule of social behavior.

\(^{76}\) Cf., e.g., Cic. Att. 13.33.4, *de Varrone loquebamur, lupus in fabula: venit enim ad me.*

\(^{77}\) Cf. Otto 1890, 199ff.
often speak of others primarily because we wish to criticize them: often, then, the extreme situation is what effectively occurs—or at any rate what the “interloper” fears is occurring. This does not imply, however, that the reason for the uneasiness, embarrassment or disturbing character of situation resides only in that it may be defamatory. The phenomenon is in fact much more general.

We have already remarked that cultural convention pretends, quite paradoxically, that people are not (and ought not to be) spoken of by others—or at any rate that people are distinct and different entities when they are being spoken about and when they themselves are participating in dialogue. But this is obviously just a matter of convention; we know things do not really work like that. This is why the belief persists that when someone is the subject of some remote conversation, they can perceive what is happening there through a ringing in the ears or because of the failure of their own conversation. This belief underscores the fact that it is difficult, if not impossible, to make two distinct entities out of a person as subject of the conversation and as the “real” individual. A conversation about someone imperceptibly tends to become a conversation with that person—even if this phenomenon is limited to ringing in the ears. When cultural convention is blatantly contradicted and the individual qua interlocutor comes to coincide with the person qua topic of conversation because that individual has in fact appeared, a sensation of rupture and uneasiness arises. But what kind of anthropological situation is created in such circumstances?

Situations of this sort negatively affect the identity of the “interloper.” If we discover that someone has transformed “us” into the subject of a conversation (“if you were a fig, you would be in my mouth”), it is like encountering a “double” of ourselves that has been circulating unimpeded in others’ conversations. This is what happens to Sosia in Plautus’ Amphitruo, when he finds himself standing before another ‘Sosia’; or to Euripides’ Helen, when she learns that it was only her eidōlon (“image”) that was seduced by Paris, first causing the Trojan War and now roaming the seas with her husband Menelaus. Conversely, when the participants in a conversation discover that the person about whom they have been speaking is there before them in flesh and blood (lupus in fabula), it is like seeing the ghost of a dead man: the absent person has suddenly and disconcertingly become present.

Perhaps, then, the Arabic grammarians’ definition of the third person—“he who is absent”—has a much more profound anthropological meaning than its use as a linguistic label suggests: by definition, “he who is absent” lives in another world, absent just as the dead and supernatural beings are absent. This is why the spoken-of person—like Hermes psychopompos or Cristina Brahe—brings silence in tow. In short, the situation of lupus in
**Death and Oblivion**

Death is silence and it cannot be any other way. Of their very nature, we cannot speak with the dead. They are absent, existing only in our memories or in conversations of which they are the subject. The dead are not “subjects” with whom we can sit down and have a conversation. For this reason, a dead man who returns and speaks inspires great fear. There is another condition, however, that relates to silence and that similarly distinguishes death from life: forgetfulness. When silence reigns, it is notoriously also impossible to remember: for example, when Odysseus goes to speak with the Dead in Homer’s *Odyssey*, he discovers that only “the mind of Teiresias is solid. Only to him do the gods grant a mind full of sense, even in death, while all the others flit about like shades.” The dead do not have minds, sense or memories: Anticlea, Odysseus’ own mother, recognizes her son only after drinking the blood of the slaughtered victims. They do not remember anything of mortal life; that is why Seneca defines them as “forgetful of themselves” (*oblitos sui*). Because the kingdoms of the living and the dead must remain distinct, Hades extends oblivion over all that came before. Above all, these two worlds must not communicate: In Vergil, souls destined for reincarnation drink from the fountain of Lethe in order to forget the experiences that they have already lived and to be able to confront the new life that awaits them. Something similar happens at the oracle of Lebedea, where in the cave of Trophonius those wishing to consult the oracle act out a kind of mock descent into Hades. The petitioner must drink the water of two fountains before descending—*lēthē*, “in order to reach a state of oblivion concerning

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78. In Hippocratic medicine, the onset of “silence” is always bound to disease or to “death” (just as the “voice” is connected to health and “life”): see Ciani 1983, 159–72.
all that they had thought up to that moment” and mnēmosunē, “in order to remember everything that they had seen in their descent.” As Vernant puts it, “he drank from the first and immediately forgot everything to do with his human life, and, like a dead man, he entered into the realm of Night.”

The association of forgetfulness and death is found in other mythological tales. When Orpheus, leaving the underworld, violates the injunctions of Persephone by turning to look back at Eurydice, he is overcome by a fit of forgetfulness. At that moment, Lake Avernus resounds three times and Eurydice is swallowed up again by the infernal regions. Orpheus’ failure of memory thus brings about the death of his beloved, as if in the act of forgetting he had again brought on that condition of perennial oblivion in which Eurydice had remained before her unexpected liberation. The denouement of Ariadne’s story explores the same symbolic connection. Overwhelmed by her misfortune, the girl asks the Eumenides that the young hero Theseus bring ruin upon himself and his family with the same “state of mind” (mens) he had when he left her on the deserted island. These are the sinister threats of a woman scorned and near the end; but the “state of mind” (mens) in which Theseus had abandoned her was the casual forgetfulness of a faithless lover. And again, it is a failure of memory that brings about the death of Aegeus, the hero’s father, who had asked his son to hoist a white flag on his return as a sign of his success and safety. Theseus, who up to that moment had remembered everything “with sure memory” (constanti mente), now has his mens “wrapped in blind darkness;“ “forgetful in spirit” (oblito . . . pectore), he brings about his father’s death, when the old man throws himself from the rocks.

Life and death must never communicate and so silence stands between them. When death enters among the living, conversation fails. In the same way, death must not preserve any memory of life. Thus, silence and forgetfulness are two complementary aspects of the noncommunication that regulates the interaction of this world and the next. Even if communication between the living and the dead were possible, such a conversation would be between those who remember (the living) and those who live in total oblivion of themselves (the dead). What, then, of those moments when the failure of conversation and the failure of memory appear to intersect, as if in

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82. Paus. Desc. 9.39.8. For other, less complete descriptions of the oracle of Trophonius, see the sources collected by Frazer 1898, 2000ff.

83. Vernant 1965a. On the relationship between death and forgetfulness in the Greco-Roman tradition, see now Brusatin 2000, 3ff.


85. Cat. 64.200ff.

86. Cat. 64.208ff.
short circuit—when conversation is interrupted because a speaker suddenly realizes that he has forgotten what he wanted to say?

In one of his letters, Seneca describes a peculiar figure of his times, Calvisius Sabinus:

He was exceedingly wealthy and had the nature and patrimony of a freedman. I have never seen a man more indecorously blessed. He had such a bad memory that sometimes he forgot Odysseus' name, sometimes Achilles', sometimes Priam's, whom he knew about as well as we know our teachers. No old slave nomenclator, who cannot recall for his master the exact names but invents them, ever saluted the citizens as poorly as he did the Achaeans and the Trojans. Nevertheless, he wanted to appear learned, and for this reason, he came up with the following expedient: he bought some slaves at a rather high price, one of whom knew Homer by heart, another Hesiod, and then assigned each of the others one of the nine lyric poets. You must not be surprised at the fact that he had paid so dear for them, given that he had not found them already instructed but had had them prepared for this purpose. When he had finally procured this troupe of slaves, he really began to annoy his guests. He would keep them all at the ready at the foot of the couch, to ask them from time to time some verse that he wished to cite—but he would also interrupt them in the middle of their speech. Satellius Quadratus, an exploiter of stupid rich people... once suggested to him to hire some grammarians to pick up the leftovers after dinner. And when Sabinus said to him that each of those slaves cost him one hundred thousand sesterces, the other retorted, "You could have bought as many bookcases full of books for less." But Sabinus had convinced himself that he knew everything that those slaves did, just because they belonged to him.87

Calvisius Sabinus cuts a rather pathetic figure. If his learned slaves somewhat resemble the Greek Carmadas—who according to Pliny "recited by memory, on request, the volumes of an entire library, as if he were reading them" (quae quis exegerat volumina in bibliotheca legentis modo representavit)88—their master is more like the grammarian Orbilius Pupillus Beneventanus, who earned himself the surname Oblivio Litterarum because he had forgotten everything he once knew by the time he was one hundred years old.89 Unlike the poor Orbilius, however, Calvisius Sabinus possessed

87. Sen. Ep. mor. 27.5ff.
88. Plin. Nat. hist. 7.89.
89. Suet. Gramm. rhet. 9. The epithetic was given to him in an epigram of Furius Bibaculus (fr. 3 Courtney).
sufficient economic resources to remedy this terrible inconvenience; he simply bought others’ memories, convinced that he himself would somehow possess their intellectual capabilities thereby. Perhaps Sabinus took literally the principle of Roman law that “we acquire not only through ourselves, but also through those whom we have in our potestas, manus or mancipium.”90 As the owner of a troupe of slaves who “possessed” good culture and (more importantly) excellent memories, Sabinus considered himself to possess those spiritual endowments in turn, believing that “he knew everything that those slaves did, just because they belonged to him.” Notwithstanding the best efforts of the slaves that he kept at the ready at the foot of his couch like some vocal library or an online archive, still he stumbled in pronouncing the words they had recalled for him not a moment before. Conversations in Calvisius Sabinus’ house must have failed often—and not because Hermes had entered the room or because an interloper had appeared unannounced. The obstacle to communication was Sabinus’ terrible memory, and it was no help trying to revive it by purchasing those extraordinary slaves. Perhaps what happened to Calvisius Sabinus was the same thing that had happened to Messala Corvinus, of which Trimalchio also complains: “I have such a good memory, that often I forget what my own name is.”91

The truth, as Pliny says, is that “in man, there is nothing so precarious [as memory]”:

morborum et casus iniurias atque etiam metus sentit, alias particulatim, alias universa. ictus lapide oblitus est litteras tantum; ex præcalto tecto lapsus matris et adfinium propinquorumque cepit oblivionem, alius aegrotus servorum, etiam sui vero nominis Messala Corvinus orator. itaque saepe deficere temptat ac meditatur vel quieto corpore et valido.92

It suffers the injuries of sickness or of a fall, and even of fright: sometimes partially, sometimes totally. A man struck by a rock forgot the letters of the alphabet; another, falling from a very high roof, forgot his mother, his relatives and his friends; yet another, overtaken by sickness, did not recognize his slaves, while the orator Messalla Corvinus could not even remember his own name. The memory attempts and conspires to flee from us even when our body is safe and unharmed.

90. Gai. Instit. 2.86ff., 3.164 and 221. Cf. De Zulueta 1963, II, 80, “The basic principles are that a paterfamilias inevitably acquires what his dependants acquire.”

91. Petr. Satyr. 66, tam bonae memoriae sum, ut frequenter nomen meum obliviscar. This is a proverbial expression: cf. Otto 1890, 244. On Messalla Corvinus, see Plin. Nat. hist. 7.90.

The memory is in constant danger and forgetfulness waits patiently in ambush—even when we are in good health (or believe that we are). This is why some suspected that failures of memory—especially when sudden—were caused by magical arts. Cicero, for example, recounts that during the defense of Titinia, Curio spoke after him but “suddenly forgot the case in its entirety and he said that this occurred because of Titinia’s potions and enchantments” (subito totam causam oblitus est idque veneficiis et cantionibus Titiniae factum est).

It would be easy to make Calvisius Sabinus the archetype of the many learned and cultured people who believe it is their right to usurp and exploit others’ intelligence to their own ends, convinced that they know everything others do for the simple reason that they belong to their familia. But Sabinus’ fragile and deficient memory inevitably brings us from the comedy of knowledge to the darkness of tragedy: Sabinus, overcome by oblivion, forgetful of the words that his learned assistants have just whispered to him, resembles a soul of the Homeric Nekuia. The phrenes (“spiritual faculties”) of the dead in the Odyssey are equally unstable (empedoi); their heads are “worn out” (amenēna karēna), and their minds are “senseless” (aphrades). Sabinus also seems like one of those “shadows of the weary” (eidōla kamontōn). Indeed, instead of a slave who knew Homer by heart and could provide him with citations from the Odyssey, Sabinus should have had someone actually perform it—pouring him a little sacrificial blood to drink, as Odysseus did for Teiresias, to make him remember.

Living Archives

Above, Seneca produces an interesting comparison in describing Calvisius Sabinus’ défaiances by employing the technical term for a slave employed for the specific purpose of reminding a forgetful or distracted master of the names of those he encountered in the course of his business (nomenclator). The image of this comparandum is fitting: a bad nomenclator who mistakes the names of those his master must greet represents very well the gaffes of someone who mistakes one Homeric hero for another. In the Senecan account, however, this reference to the nomenclator anticipates the appearance of those learned slaves whose duty was to remind their master of the

94. Hom. Od. 10.493,
95. Hom. Od. 10.521 and 536, 11.29 and 49,
96. Hom. Od. 11.476,
97. Hom. Il. 3.278, 23.72; Od. 11.476, 24.10,
texts he had forgotten, and who function in a manner very similar to the nomenclatores. Here, we enter the fascinating realm of “memory aids”—but not in the sense of mnemonic devices, mental maps, techniques of memorization, notes or memoranda that take advantage of writing (or in more modern times, of printing). Instead, we are about to encounter a kind of living instrument of memory, a figure whose duty and function was to combat forgetfulness—to remember and to make others remember.

There were various such figures at Rome. Nomenclatores were employed to remind their masters of the names of clientes; or, during elections, to allow the candidates to create a false sense of familiarity with their constituents. (Otherwise, a Roman citizen might be compelled to use the generic appellative dominus, roughly translatable as “Sir”). There were also monitores, whose job was to stand next to the orator in the forum and remind him of what he should say or do. The same word also denoted what we might call a theatrical “prompter” as well as libri commentarii.

When memory fails, help is needed—and in a culture where writing had not yet supplanted orality in the task of conserving and archiving information, “memory aids” might be not only lists of “talking points” or agendas, but also the living memories of human beings. (From this perspective, it is interesting that libri commentarii as well as “prompters” in a theater could be defined as monitores: begging pardon for the pun, it is almost as if the designation of those written instruments still preserved some memory of their oral predecessors.) Consider, for example, the words of Euryalus to Odysseus when the hero presents himself in disguise. The arrogant suitor says that Odysseus does not seem to him “a man expert in contests, but rather one who sails upon the sea in a ship of many oars, who commands merchant sailors and cares for the cargo, goods and alluring gain.” In the Homeric text, the expression phortou . . . mnēmōn means literally “mindful of the cargo.” On the significance of this term, the ancient Homeric exegetes make some observations that are worth considering.

According to a scholiast’s comment on Odyssey 8.163, it was a mnēmōn who “remembered what the value of each piece was.” Homer’s use of this
expression, moreover, indicated to some—again according to the scholiast—that the heroic age did not know the use of the alphabet: “they say that they kept the cargo in memory because they did not have knowledge of letters.” The scholiast goes on to say that it was for this reason—i.e., the maintenance of cargo lists—that the Phoenician traders invented the alphabet. In ancient usage, however, the word mnémōn was applied to both the “secretary” (grammateus) and the “provisioner” (epimeletēs).

The mnémōn, then, appears to have been a kind of on-board commissary and, at the same time, a cargo manifest—one who both took care of those on board and also registered the value of each piece of merchandise in memory. In the absence of writing, the inventory of goods corresponded not to a written document, but to a person—the mnémōn—who functioned as an archivist, paradoxically also constituting the archive itself. The Phoenicians invented the alphabet to free the mnémōn from this difficult task, wishing to delegate to the more trustworthy expedient of writing the data that previously had burdened the memory.

In this sense, the polarity between the two Greek expressions—the more recent grammateus and the more ancient mnémōn—takes on almost emblematic value. The word grammateus derives from gramma (“letter of the alphabet”) and therefore provides us with a “written” equivalent of the ancient mnemonic functionary. Plato amuses himself in an elegant metaphorical construction by reversing the two terms of the question, defining “memory” (mnēmē) as “our grammateus” and describing it while he registered the impressions that he received in written form (graphein). In other words, “graphic” reasoning had already so pervaded the world of information and communication that, for Plato, “memory” itself could become a scribe. In Latin, too, terms such as obliviscor, oblivio and (even more transparently) oblittero take their meaning from the act of erasing a surface on which letters have been traced: that is, “forgetfulness” has assumed the form of an erasure—the cancellation of what has been written.

Returning to the mnémōn. Although little evidence remains, it is apparent that this figure played an important role in myth and heroic tales:

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106. Plat. Phil. 39a. The dialectic between oral and written memory, or oral and written communication, was obviously maintained for a long time in Greece—in, e.g., the case of the grammateus, the city’s “public reader” who “gave voice” to the letter written by Nikias (Thuc. Hist. 7.8–10). Nikias decided to entrust his message to writing because he feared the “obscuring” it would have undergone “through a messenger” (en tōi angelōi); see the analysis of Guastella 1997, 15ff.


for example, in the story of Achilles and Tenes,\textsuperscript{109} Thetis prohibits her son from killing Tenes because he has been honored by Apollo—and Achilles was destined to die if ever he killed someone of Apollo’s line.\textsuperscript{110} Thetis therefore assigns a slave to stay beside Achilles to remind him of this prohibition. Unknowingly, however, Achilles kills Tenes and, when he realizes what he has done, also kills the slave who had failed in his duty. In Lycophron the slave is actually named “Mnemon,” revealing his function through his name. Lycophron also mentions the interesting detail that the slave failed in his task because he had been “conquered by forgetfulness” (\textit{léthargōi sphaleis}).\textsuperscript{111}

Eustathius provides ample evidence of other \textit{mnēmones} of heroic legend,\textsuperscript{112} beginning with an account of the story of Chalcon Kyparisseus who, according to Asclepiades of Mirlea,\textsuperscript{113} was assigned as “\textit{mnēmōn} and squire” to Nestor’s son Antilochus. Nestor had received an oracle that his son “should keep away from the Ethiopian,” and therefore assigned Chalcon to his son to remind him of this. Chalcon, however, fell in love with Penthesilea and ran to help her and thus was killed by Achilles. Antilochus was in turn killed by Memnon (the “Ethiopian”) and Chalcon’s body was impaled by the Greeks. Eustathius remarks that “\textit{mnēmones} were given also to other heroes,” as in the case of Achilles already mentioned. According to Timolaus of Macedonia,\textsuperscript{114} even Patroclus had his own \textit{mnēmōn} named Eudoros, who was assigned to Patroclus “so he would not drive too far forward” during the battle. But Eudoros was killed by Pyraichmos, who was then killed by Patroclus—and Patroclus, as we know, was himself killed by Hector. According to Antipatros of Acanthus, Hector, too, had a \textit{mnēmōn}\textsuperscript{115} named Daretes Phrygius whose task it was to remind him “not to kill anyone dear to Achilles.” After deserting his post, however, Daretes was killed by Odysseus—and Hector’s


\textsuperscript{110} See the scholion of Tzetzes ad Lyc. \textit{Alex.} 241ff.

\textsuperscript{111} Lyc. \textit{Alex.} 241–2.

\textsuperscript{112} Comm. ad Hom. \textit{Il.} 11.521. Cf. Halliday 1928. 133ff., who does not, however, comment on this other than to note its late, literary character. It is useful to note that the account of Eustathius is echoed by the \textit{resumé} of Ptolomaes Chennus’s \textit{Nova Historia} given by Photius (\textit{Bib.} 147a). On Ptolomaus Chennus, see “Ptolemaios Chennos” in \textit{RE} XXIII, 2, 1959, col. 1862.

\textsuperscript{113} A grammarian of the 1st c. BCE: see “Asklepiades von Myrlea” in \textit{RE} II, 2, 1896, coll. 1628ff.; Jacoby 1957, III C, 548–51; and Müller 1851, III, 298ff. The fragment is not reported in either of these works: but see Jacoby 1957, I A, 296ff.


\textsuperscript{115} Perhaps an author invented by Ptolomaes Chennus: see “Antipatros von Akanthos” in \textit{RE} I, 2, 1894, col. 2517. Jacoby 1957, I A, 296–97 has a section dedicated to Antipater of Acanthus, in which he cites the text of Eustathius and that of Ptolomaes Chennus from Photius. No entry either in the commentary or in the \textit{Nachträge} corresponds to the text, however.
Part 1. Mythology

Fate is well known. According to Eresius,116 Protesilaus also had a mnēmōn named Dardanus of Thessaly. Protesilaus’ father had assigned Dardanus to his son after receiving an oracle that “he would die if he was the first to disembark.” Protesilaus was later killed by a “Trojan man” (Dardanos anēr) because of Dardanus’ inattentiveness to his task.117 Photius catalogues other mnēmōnes:118 Odysseus’ father is supposed to have given to his son a Cephalenian mnēmōn by the name of Muiscos, while Achilles is supposed to have had a Carthaginian mnēmōn named Noemon. As may be seen, Achilles always has mnēmōnes with very significant names: Mnemon’s name derives from “memory” itself (mnēmē), whereas Noemon’s comes from “intelligence” (nous).

The figure of the mnēmōn seems to be inserted into well-known episodes of Homeric myth—the heroic deaths of Achilles, Patroclus, Antilochus, Hector, Protesilaus and so on—almost as a touch of tragic irony. These are all heroes who receive explicit condemnations of fate and for this reason are given mnēmōnes with the specific task of keeping them from their own destinies. Consequently, the figure of the mnēmōn is entrusted with the part of the story or event that we know from the most traditional variants of the myth to have been the cause of the hero’s death. Thus, Achilles’ mnēmōn had the task of reminding him “not to kill a descendant of Apollo,” Hector’s the task of reminding him “not to kill someone dear to Achilles,” Protesilaus’ that of reminding him “not to disembark first” and so on. No mnēmōn, however, can stand in the way of destiny. According to the logic of myth, the mnēmōn must always fail in the task he has been assigned; the story demands that the mnēmōn play the paradoxical role of he who remembers (and makes others remember) and he who forgets.

There are various reasons for the mnēmōn’s failure: it may be a matter of explicit—but otherwise unexplained—forgetfulness (Mnemon); of love (Chalcon), desertion (Daretes) or simple absentmindedness (Dardanus of Thessaly). In this last case, the story is particularly clever. At the end, we learn that a mnēmōn named “Dardanus” was probably the least suitable of all to play the role of bodyguard for Protesilaus, given the homonymy he shared with the man destined to kill the hero. Here, the mnēmōn has the paradoxi-

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116. An author known only to Eustathius: cf. “Eresios” in RE VI, 1, 1907, col. 420. In Ptolomeus Chennus, the story is attributed to Antipater of Acanthus. In the apparatus criticus, Jacoby 1957, I A, 297 notes that before “Eresios” the name of the author has been lost.

117. The killing of Protesilaus by a “Dardanian man” (Dardanos anēr) is told by Hom. II. 2.701 and therefore the story represents a somewhat fantastic re-elaboration of the Homeric line. Cf. Thraemer, 1901. This obscure Homeric mention had been explained in various ways already in antiquity, attributing to the mysterious “Dardanian” the identity of Aeneas, Hector, Euphorbus and so forth. Cf. Leaf 1900, I, 103 ad loc.

cal task of defending the hero from “himself”: he was supposed to be the faithful “double” of his charge but turned out to be that of his assassin.

In this type of story, the mnēmōn acts as a kind of alter ego for the hero. Like an image reflected in a mirror, he is supposed to warn and remind the hero of something—even if in the event he deliberately does not do so or does not succeed in doing so. The mnēmōn thus functions as a kind of external memory bank for the hero—a walking monumentum, as it were. This figure thus closely resembles the Roman monitor entrusted with the task of reminding his master of a single event. (In other cases, the same effect is obtained by modifying a significant part of the body: for example, letting one’s hair grow—or shaving it—until a certain goal had been achieved, somewhat as we do when we change the position of a ring or tie a knot in a handkerchief.)

Modern culture is highly sensitive to the theme of information storage. It is therefore worth considering the role of the mnēmōn, monitor and nomenclator from the perspective of modern theory of “distributed cognition,” which explores the ways in which human beings entrust a part of our cognition and memory to some aspect (or indeed many aspects) of our external environment. This process permits us to “unload” our minds of excess data that would otherwise be difficult to utilize. In this light, mnēmones, monitores and nomenclatores were clearly more powerful than the classic knot in a handkerchief, the agenda, the card file and most modern data storage systems. These individuals not only contained information, but also were capable of producing it whenever needed. In roughly technological terms, we might say that these ancient figures were themselves “databases” that provided a kind of interactive “software” program for accessing all the information contained on the “disk.” The limited development of written culture as well as the easy availability of “human instruments” in Roman society guaranteed that even memory aids and information support systems were realized through a form of human interaction.

Finally, there are those cases in which the mnēmōn served a public and specifically juridical function. We know of certain mnēmones whose duty was to “remember the religious calendar” (hieromnēmonein), for example. As Gernet notes in his famous study, the mnēmōn “prefigures in Greece char-

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119. Her. Hist. 1.82.7–8 recounts that after losing Tira, the Argives forbade anyone to allow their hair to grow and prohibited the women from wearing gold jewelry until they had regained it. The Spartans decreed the opposite: although they had never worn their long hair up to that moment, they decide that from then on they would let it grow.

120. See the well-known work of Norman 1995, 139–54, as well as Vigotsky 1987, 81ff.

121. Ar. Nub. 624.
acteristic institutions of modern law, such as the archive and recording.”

The title of *mnēmones* later passed to the magistrates charged with preserving written documents; but having no knowledge of writing, the so-called Law Code of Gortyn was entrusted to a group of *mnēmones* who functioned as assistants to the magistrates, as true and proper “living records.” The *mnēmōn* had not only the capacity to remember and to make others remember the past; above all, he possessed the authority of memory. He enjoyed the dignity of an archive and was as reliable as only written documents are for us.

“Stuffed Ears” and the Location of Memory

Let us return to Rome. A gloss informs us that the *nomenclatores* who reminded candidates of the names of their constituents had a peculiar nickname: *fartores* (literally, “stuffers” or “fillers”). Paulus Festus explains: “*nomenclatores* are called *fartores* because without anyone realizing it they ‘stuff’ all the names of the people whom the candidate must greet into his ear” (*fartores nomenclatores, qui clam velut infercirent nomina salutatorum in aurem candidati*). The metaphor is almost ridiculous; actually, it is probably comic, since it corresponds to certain images found in Plautus: for instance, charged with carrying a message to Toxilus, the slave-girl Sophoclidisca remarks, “I will approach Toxilus; I will load his ears with the things I have been charged with telling him” (*conveniam hunc Toxilum; eius auris quae mandata sunt onerabo*). Jokes in Roman political life were apparently inspired by the comic poets and grammarians, diligent collectors of words, noted down these creations of the vernacular language in their scholarly lexicons, making them objects of erudition.

The metaphor is telling, however: the *nomenclator* who whispers the name of some unfamiliar individual into the candidate’s ear behaves as a *fartor*—a professional “stuffer” of animals (especially birds) or sausage maker. The candidate’s ears are like an empty skin into which the slave stuffs the names of those the candidate should (but does not) recognize. That is, the ears function as a place where the memory “keeps” words.

123. Paul. Fest. p. 78 Lindsay. Cf. also Acro’s scholion on Hor. Serm. 3.3.229.
126. Cf. TLL VI, 287, 8ff. For *fartor* in the sense of *saginator*: Plaut. Truc. 105; Ter. Eun. 257 (and Eugraphius’s commentary); Hor. Serm. 2.3.229; and, above all, Col. Re rust. 8.7.1, “it is the task of the *fartor* to fatten the chickens, not the peasant’s”; *fartor* in the sense of “sausage-maker,” cf. Donatus ad Ter. Eun. 257, *fartores qui insicia et farcimina faciunt*. 
Within this metaphorical field, we may once more consider the weasel. Besides being thought to conceive through the ears and give birth through the mouth—as we have seen—the weasel was also apparently believed to conceive through the mouth and give birth through the ears. This belief also relates to language:

The Law (*Leviticus* 11:29) says: Do not eat the weasel or anything like it. The Physiologus said of the weasel that it has this nature: its mouth receives from the male and, having conceived, it gives birth from the ears. There are some who eat the sacred bread in church, *but as soon as they have left, they reject the word from their ears*, like the impure weasel. And they become like the deaf asp that seals its own ears.\(^{127}\)

To express that someone needs to be reminded of something, why does Roman culture say “to stuff the ears”? By the same token, why can forgetting what one has heard be likened to having one’s ears “emptied”? Because in the process of oral communication, information must of course pass through the ears. But I suspect memory is also directly involved in the “stuffed ears” of he who must not forget and in the “empty ears” of he who rejects the words that he has heard. Let us see.

Horace, desperately beset by that infamous babbling *garrulus* who has decided to torture him at all costs, is rescued only by the unexpected arrival of someone embroiled in a court case with the annoying man.\(^{128}\) Wishing to drag the importunate man off to court, Horace’s savior asks the poet, *licet antestari* (“Are you disposed to bear me witness?”) and he responds, *ego vero oppono auriculam* (“Obviously, I offer my earlobe”). Blabbermouths are a curse;\(^{129}\) but what of Horace’s earlobe? Porphyrio explains its significance: “The adversary of the annoying man asks Horace if he would be disposed to bear him witness, so as to allow him to drag the man before the praetor. . . . When someone called another to witness, he touched him on the earlobe and said to him ‘Are you disposed to bear me witness?’” (*adversarius molesti illius Horatium consultit an permittat se antestari, injecta manu extracturus ad praetorem quod vadimonio non paruerit . . . porro autem qui antestabatur, auriculam ei tangbat atque dicebat, ‘licet te antestari?’*).\(^{130}\)

The act of touching someone on the earlobe has symbolic value and serves precisely to remind someone of something. We know this from other
Vergil recounts that when Apollo addressed him, the god “pulled my ear and admonished me” (aurem / vellit et admonuit). The poet had abandoned his duty; rather than writing pastoral poetry, herding flocks and singing a carmen deductum, he had turned to celebrating kings and battles. By pulling one of his ears, the god meant to remind him of this. Likewise, Seneca wishes that there were “some guardian that could pull my ear (aurem subinde pervellat) at the right moment, distance us from gossiping and protest against the praises of the masses.” In other words, touching and pulling the ear was a gestural translation of the verb admonere. For this reason, touching someone’s earlobe was a customary invitation for him or her to appear before a magistrate on one’s behalf.

But why, for the Romans, did the act of touching the earlobe function in this way? Pliny explains the meaning of the gesture as follows: “The memory is situated in the earlobe and by touching it, we call someone as a witness. Likewise, the place behind the right ear is dedicated to Nemesis, where we pass our ring finger after having touched it with the lips, as if to replace there the pardon that we ask of the gods for our words” (est in aure ima memoriae locus, quem tangentes antestamur; est post aurem aequa dexteram Nemeseos . . . quo referimus tactum ore proximum a minimo digitum, veniam sermonis a diis ibi recondentes).

As part of a “symbolic anatomy” associating the faculties or sentiments of the soul with certain parts of the body—Pliny informs us that according to popular belief the site of vitalitas, for example, was the knees—the earlobe functioned as the seat of memory. Since memory was “located” in the earlobe, touching or pulling that part of the body served as a way to jog the memory—just as touching someone’s knees initiated an act of supplication, an appeal to their most intimate vitalitas.

A final observation on the mnemonic powers of the ears. Plutarch asserts that the hearing duct connected directly to the psuchē (“soul”): in other words, that between the ear and the individual’s spiritual faculties a direct channel of communication existed. In this regard, what Pliny has said about

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131. See Otto 1890, 48.
132. Verg. Ecl. 6.3.
134. This symbolic gesture lives on today in certain cultures, although the modern act seems to have assumed an almost exclusively punitive or prohibitive meaning: it is used to warn someone (usually a child) not to repeat a certain action: cf. Morris 1983, 256ff. Nevertheless, a good tug on the ear—even if it is only metaphorical—preserves some connection with the sphere of memory and still has the value of an admonition. It is possible, moreover, that something of this ancient custom’s meaning remains in the modern habit of pulling someone’s ears on their birthday as a solemn reminder of how far they have come in life.
the “place of Nemesis” merits further comment. According to Pliny, when someone wishes to ask pardon of the gods for some imprudent word they have uttered (thus potentially inviting the arrival of Nemesis), it is customary to pass the ring finger across the lips and then to “put it back” behind the lobe of the right ear. Was this to signify that in the future one would be mindful not to commit the same mistake again? This gesture is almost equivalent to tugging one’s own ear to remind one’s self not to repeat such an anger-provoking blunder, and thus to screen one’s self from the vengeance of the gods. In fact, even in some modern cultures—for example, in Turkey and southern Italy—touching the ear has apotropaic value.

We also learn from Pliny that “some placate anxiety by passing a bit of saliva behind the ear with their finger” (alias saliva post aurem digito relata sollicitudinem animi propitiat). As often in the case of gestures, they are difficult to define and interpret unambiguously—but it is possible that in the act of passing the ring finger behind the right ear after touching it to the lips as well in passing saliva behind the ear with the finger, the “meanings” of self-admonition, saliva’s apotropaic power, and even unrelated, nervous movement caused by situational anxiety all coexist. In such cases, by touching meaningful parts of our body we communicate directly with ourselves, using a language whose deepest meanings we have only partially forgotten.

We could continue this journey through the symbolic places of memory and oblivion, language and silence at some length, to prove just how much the cultures of antiquity differ from our own—at least with regard to communication and its symbology. But we will stop here, since we seem to have come full circle to the ears—the ears of Hermes, god and symbol of communication.

139. Morris 1983, 259–64 explains this gesture as the equivalent of “touching a metal,” with reference to an earring that is no longer worn. Pliny demonstrates that this explanation is incorrect.
141. Cf. also Plin. Nat. hist. 28.36, veniam quoque a deis spei alicuius audacioris petimus in sinum spuendo. Cf. also Petr. Sat. 74. On the powers of saliva, see Elworthy 1895, 414ff.