

Thinking on One's Feet: Training Thought through Action in Renaissance Italy

1. Prelude: a Machiavellian movement

Changing ideas through the body?

In 16th century Florence, unpredictability had become expected: between the Medici's disgrace (1494), and forceful return (1512); and Savonarola's and Soderini's very different leaderships of the city during their absence; political and social upheaval had become a recurring circumstance. The people of Florence participated actively in these rearrangements of the power structure, manifesting their agency in various forms. Streets and piazzas became the set for various genres of heated collective action, from classic municipal tumults to horror-movie grade scenes—like armed groups of white-clad children. The original sin sparking this fire was the descent of Charles VIII's (French) troops through the Peninsula in 1494. In what would have been the preview of the Sack of Rome (1527), the unified, army-less Italian states were forced to realize their vulnerability to foreign predation.

Calculating unpredictability is the undercurrent theme of Niccolò Machiavelli's impetuous writings. Ever the armed prophet, he kept making political and military vulnerability the center of his wordy worries. In 1521, he published some of them: a quite exceptional occurrence, considering that his great successes for which we all know him today, like the *Prince* and the *Discourses*, only enjoyed the honor of the presses posthumously. Conversely, the thoughts he chose to "gift to Italy" (Cristicchi, 2025), were those of a work hardly taken into account now, the *Art of War* (*Arte della Guerra*). In this rather long dialogue between a veteran army captain and a group of young Florentines, Machiavelli explains his project for a citizen army in terms of both a military necessity for the city's defense, and of a moral reform. Rivalry among families and factions, which hindered the potential of the city (and of Italy as a whole) to resist foreign pressure and reinforce self sovereignty, could be overridden through a specific program of military-type *training*.

Not only does the *Art of War* describe the type of exercises deemed necessary to reinforce the body for battle and handle weapons correctly (notable exception, guns); but it does describe, at length, the exercises needed to coordinate the individual bodies into a cohesive unit. Weekly public exercises would then be complemented by open-field training, in an attempt to embed the mindset necessary to maintain ranks (*ordini*) in Florence's male citizenship. According to Machiavelli, the rank-mentality was characterized by a well-developed and -honed instinct for common action—which inevitably would nourish the *taste* for such a kind of action in the Florentine population. Moral and civic mentality, more than just military, would result from this training: solidarity, courage, even the end of factionalism—all in a very short time, since foreign troops were probing the Alps and the Mediterranean alike.

This is not a study of Machiavelli, but the Art of War shows rather clearly an element of early modern Italian culture that tends to remain opaque even to specialists. Why did Machiavelli believe that a heightened sense of unity and agency would derive from a reform of civic ritual and battlefield priorities? And why did he see this reform as the quickest, most efficient way (if not the only one) to achieve such a change? In what follows, I shall search for an explanation in relatively obscure yet extremely widespread early modern beliefs regarding the functioning of body-mind unity. These beliefs are hardly expressed in the period's philosophical treatises—in fact, they are scarcely expressed in any text. However, they tend to emerge in those produced with practical application as their primary goal: how-to manuals. In particular, glimpses of the body-mind conjoined action become visible in manuals where body-techniques are foundational for the acquisition of mind-habits. For this reason, I will here investigate those pertaining to memorization techniques and to (sword)fighting, or fencing. Here, an early modern systematic use of embodied practices betrays a faith in the possibilities that training the body offers toward training the mind.

2.Problem

Under one's skin and into one's mind

I contend that Renaissance thinkers recognized and put to use the connection between 1. the automatization (habituation) of certain *embodied actions* in a specific context, 2. the internalization of specific *patterns of thought*, and 3. the development of a *tendency toward a specific behavior* in all contexts. For instance, in Machiavelli's case, this would look like: 1. Marching in closed ranks for hours 2. Naturalizing the expectation of being protected by other bodies 3. Considering collective action as the safe, available, obvious reaction to the next French invasion.

In order to allow a passage like this (repeated physical action → body-habit → thought-habit → behavior), the connection between the body's repeated action, the resulting physical habit, and the mind-habit that brings to punctual, contingent decision-making, must be direct and strong. Such connection is not to be taken for granted—not in the 1500s, nor today. While dexterity in a duel is expected of someone who spent years in fencing practice, much less so would they be expected to manage a conversation with the same degree of nimbleness and swift decisiveness. However, in Machiavelli's world, mastery of sword-fighting and of debating were seen as pertaining to the same skill set, because they required the same quality of internalized reactions to contingent stimuli: quick, precise, able to disarm the adversary—in a word, *striking*. The fact that one action (fencing) be physical and the other (debating) intellectual and verbal, is marginal for the Florentine rouge.

In my research, I take this parallel as more than a metaphoric connection: I am testing the actual correspondences at the cognitive level between thought-habit and body-habit—whether they work the same way, and how they connect. To do that, I am utilizing how-to manuals, where the period's

theories of cognition are expanded beyond what philosophy and theology admitted and into the results of empirical findings. The lower status of these books indeed allowed their authors to admit to systematic uses of the body, tied as it was to materiality, with the intent of changing one's mind and soul—to rearrange them so that they would naturally react in specific ways: virtuous ways.

The fact that these reactions were naturalized, made second-nature, is important: while their complete automatization is too problematic, actively developing an *inclination* for a certain kind of reaction is entirely possible, and actually desirable. This inclination, or readiness to react in a certain way, echoes the notion of Aristotle's *hexis* (often translated with *habitus*, before Bourdieu): an *active* disposition acquired through repetition of a stimulus-and-response situation. An experiential learning, in which one is to constantly choose the best possible response to an external stimulus. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle famously defines virtue as a *hexis* (II 5): not a passive, automatized answer, but a generative condition of the soul.

What is remarkable here is that, in order to develop such an active, responsive, improvisational disposition, early modern people would entrust the body as much as the mind—in some cases (like Machiavelli's) even more than it. Importantly, the body in these manuals represents a preferential way to internalize not only gestures, but dynamic notions and behaviors able to lead to good judgement of each contingent situation. Physical habituation through repetition and the acquisition of a specific thought-pattern, or even an entire mental disposition, coincide in the practice, whether navigating a mental palace or gauging one's distance from fellow dancers. In other words, Aristotle's *hexis* remains relevant in the practices, even in its most radical formulation, that of *De Anima* (417b, 15-17), in which the effects of perception are themselves labeled as *hex(e)is* (as opposed to *diathesis*, a "passive" disposition).

If perception is conceived as continuous evaluation and judgment, requiring the specific type of readiness of an active soul (virtue), then first of all, the encounter with reality through the senses is itself a constant exercise of self-formation, making embodied action a main road to virtue. Secondly, but not less importantly, from this perspective the conception of an active soul is not superimposable to that of a conscious mind. Aquinas insisted at least on a divine mediation, hence an element of awareness and will, between the disposition and the action. However, Renaissance embodied practices seem to corroborate exactly Aristotle's insistence that virtue, *hexis*, can be at once "mindless"—a habit, a second-nature, a quasi automatic reflex—and chosen, measured, judged. Through the body, semi-conscious cognitive operations are made possible, that guide people's physical, intellectual, even moral life. But how?

2. Solving

A lost body of knowledge: sources

In my larger project, I want to investigate whether Machiavelli was an isolated case (spoiler: he was not, but as usual, he was the one who dared to write it) —that is, whether there was a more generalizable theory of mind-changing through the body; how the correspondence between physical and thought-habits was mapped and used; what kind of thought was developed through this connection, and in what realms was it deemed useful; and what applications (especially political) of this passage were imagined at the time. For this presentation, however, given the time constraints and the advancement of my research, I want to utilize some case-studies that explain the cognitive mechanisms at play to test whether they result convincing to a very informed audience:

- *memorization manuals* to show that training to acquire specific mental habits utilized embodied action made habitual;
- *fighting and dancing manuals* to show that embodied habits were thought of as bringing about a different kind of thinking—as though-training.

In order to make the two disciplines legible as thought-training devices (toward improvisational thought), it is necessary to understand the epistemological context in which they developed. It makes sense, in this view, to start from memorization techniques, for two reasons. First, since all these Arts are obsolete in today's technological and cultural horizon, but the Art of Memory is particularly obscure. Secondly, because dealing with the dynamics of memory, and of embodied memorization techniques, is a necessary premise to understand what is going on elsewhere.

In the manuals, in fact, memory was seen as essentially sense-derived—blurring the distinction between memories regarding movements, and those regarding ideas. Moreover, memory's main goal was compositional, its elements to be reused promptly and intelligently, in dealing with an ever-shifting reality. This improvisational character of the early modern conception of memory nears it to a training more akin to sports and finance today than it is to scholarship. Therefore, mapping its working principles gives us a precious insight into a moment of Western past in which the epistemological premises were different—and so were the cognitive mechanisms that were praised, trained, and honed.

The forgotten art of remembering

In the 16th century, European intellectual life was transformed by rapid epistemological shifts: the discovery of the Americas, the Reformation, and the proliferation of printed texts (the Gutenberg-Columbus-Luther axis) greatly challenged existing frameworks for managing knowledge. Amid this upheaval, the art of memory resurfaced as one of the most ambitious attempts to manage

the rapidly shifting intellectual landscape. This Art, far from being a singular or abstract system, was a composite of long-standing theories and, above all, practical techniques. These were as ancient as oral culture, and fundamental to it: they permitted the internalization of extremely large datasets, usually to initiates tasked with knowledge. For centuries, it had formed part of basic education across Europe, especially within the rhetorical tradition, where its primary functions were twofold: to allow for fast and accurate long-term memorization (*memoria*); and to ensure equally fast and reliable recall (*reminiscentia*).

In a pre-printing world still dominated by oral transmission, the memory arts were the expression of the need for one's memory to retain all the information needed for composition—from everyday conversation to high-stakes speeches or letters. In other words, memory practices were embedded in all knowledge production. While the advent of print culture would eventually render them obsolete, this process was neither immediate nor linear. In fact, in the century following the invention of the printing press, the Arts reached a new apex of popularity, saturated as they were by the requests of the time's information overload (real or perceived, with Blair), yet thriving because of the overload itself.

Like a toolbox offering a more or less vast array of instruments, memory had to be kept in order, or else the tools would not be usable. In the 16th century, when the demand of tools increased enormously, many were the attempts at rearranging the old box—before it was thrown away and substituted with another set of instruments, centered on the practices of writing. The memory arts became a laboratory for experimentation, as the works of Paolo Rossi and Frances Yates first uncovered.

At the heart of the art of memory was the technique of the *memory palace*, a method that required users to mentally construct and navigate a well-known architectural space populated with striking, emotionally charged images—each standing in for a piece of information. These imagined figures (*imagines agentes*) were placed with precision in the palace's rooms or hallways (*loci*), creating a spatial sequence that the memorizer could virtually walk through. A more precise description of the technique can be found later in this paper; for not, suffice to say that the Renaissance memory palace derived from the confluence of two different traditions. On the one hand, classical memory techniques, which were essentially aiming at rhetorical, performative tasks like those of oratory; on the other, monastic memory techniques, focused on meditation and self-shaping.

The memory techniques resulting from this synthesis were at once self-shaping and performative, blending the goals along with the practices. Importantly, the former had become tied to the city, leaning toward the classics' political intents and their performative tools. While the latter had remained tied to the monastery, retaining the link between one's inner life and movements (passions, emotions) and one's behavior. Even more importantly, these monastic-derived practices,

at least in the Catholic world, made explicit use of the body's possibilities—from walking through spaces, to eliciting vivid scenes. Part classical orator and part monk, the Renaissance citizen was expected to monitor others as well as the self, and to choose the perfect word, among those memorized, for each contingent social occasion.

From senses to memory: Renaissance cognitive theory
(if time is pressing, feel free to skip to “temporary conclusions”)

A differentiation between what can be known with the senses vis-à-vis with “higher” faculties is not a prerogative of the Cartesian divide, but rather a Leitmotif of Western epistemologies. Indeed, while the manuals I analyzed were being written, throughout the 16th century and around it, philosophical theories of the soul were at best ambivalent toward a radically materialistic position like that I just introduced. More often than not (and until Pomponazzi, virtually in all cases), the most congenial position was that of Aristotle, who declared that for the thinking soul “images take the place of direct perceptions Hence the soul never thinks without a mental image” (*De Anima* III.7, 431a). Just like perception is the result of the “activation” of the soul by the sensory stimulus, so thinking is the “activation” of the soul via a mental image.

Things get complicated however, when the origins of that mental image are investigated. In Aristotle, the connection between sensory perception and memory is direct: mental images, in Aristotle's doctrine, are the product of a physical interaction with the world. In *De Anima* Aristotle described the functioning of perception, thinking, and memory. This fundamental text had been the object of Scholastic thinkers Albertus Magnus's and of Thomas Aquinas' privileged attention, who in turn received it from the Arab commentary tradition, particularly Avicenna and Averroes. All of these thinkers grappled with the problem of the limits of human knowledge, producing immensely fascinating and complicated solutions, which they mapped, in a way that will be familiar to us today, on the human brain. A brain-centric vision of human faculties is not to be taken for granted—in fact, it was a derivation of Galen's vision superimposed on Aristotle, who instead distributed sensory perception, emotional and intellectual elaboration across different “souls” (vegetative, sensitive, rational) and organs (the heart being the center of his physiology).

Nevertheless, by the 15th century, the brain was solidly inhabited by ethereal spirits (*phantasmata*) carrying sensory, emotional, and intellectual stimuli alike, even though they were differentiated in a myriad different ways—often incompatible and always confusing. Inside the brain, a variable number of chambers connected by narrow passages (*vermis*) or confluent into one another, hosted a variable number of faculties (as many as seven or as few as three). These were ordered from front to back, in a movement that mimicked the Aristotelian doctrine of perception, from senses to memory. Memory was still seen as the end-point of a process starting in sense-perception; however, the materiality of the latter was rarified/purified. Sensory perception, through a complex series of

transformations of the sensory stimulus into a more ethereal entity, were eventually stored in the archives of memory.

The configuration of this system was procured by the conflation of Aristotle's inert memory, which was material, and as such non-inventive; and Galen's brain-centric physiology, which procured a venue for this purification process. As such, late Medieval and Renaissance thinkers alike operate on the assumption that whatever enters the five "windows" of the senses will first of all be collected in a frontal chamber (*sensus communis*), where sensory stimuli are usually combined in units of meaning, to which a basic judgment of good/bad useful/non useful is assigned (what the Scholastics will call *intentiones*). After this passage, these units of meaning are shifted through the cranium into other ventricles, in a number oscillating between seven and three, which elaborate these units of meaning thanks to more or less divine intervention, depending on the philosopher. Finally, they enter memory, where they are stored, more or less orderly.

Inside the palace: memory hacking

The memory palace, the most complete of Renaissance memory techniques, combines place-navigation with image-based narrative to offer the most secure and direct avenue towards long-term retrieval-efficient memorization. In the words of one of its masters, Filippo Gesualdo, "You should not be scared at the beginning to find this exercise so fatiguing, because it is such a greatly useful and beneficial thing, and ... you will have it [the benefit] forever" (*Plutosofia* 44v). By leveraging, or "hacking" two activities that humans are skilled at, navigation and narrative, the device enabled the memorization of large sets of data that would otherwise be nearly impossible to retain. For instance, contemporary "memory athletes" can recite long sequences of digits of pi, in the right order. Clearly, such a wide and precise retention skill is much more useful in oral cultures, whereas now such tasks are offloaded to paper or digital spaces. However, my concern lies not much with the use (at least not in this specific study), but rather with the mechanisms of the palace. Both place navigation and narrative involve the body, albeit in different ways.

The memory palace technique consists of two different but coordinated translations of information into more easily remembered elements. On the one hand, the translation of data order into a physical space, usually an architecture, the *loci*; on the other, that of the information itself into vivid pictures or scenes, the *imagines*. By navigating the virtual palace, the practitioner would see the images and be reminded of the various ideas in a specific order. Through a relentless repetition of the stroll through the *loci* with its many *imagines*-encounters, the practitioner would internalize both—the data, and its order. These would then constitute a repertoire of memories that the practitioner could access easily and swiftly.

This, according to my reconstruction, is due to the peculiarly "sensory", or embodied nature of the

palace-visualization. However virtual, indeed, these mental palaces were built using the sensations and expectations of the practitioner's own embodied experiences; and to be effective, both the architecture composing the palace and the images stored in it replicate the sensory and instinctual effects of real places and scenes. For instance, the common recommendation in the manuals is that the *loci* be constructed on architectures well-known to the practitioner, through direct (i.e. physical) experience: a childhood home, a familiar church, or the monastery where they lived. The practitioner's body needed to navigate these places effortlessly, with distances and details embedded in muscle memory. Moreover, the places (*loci*) have to be imagined as easily sensed: moderate lighting, silence, and solitude are predicated as optimal for the practice—but also the space's segmentation and continuity of its segments. All these aspects help the navigation being as smooth and uninterrupted as possible, revealing that imagined sensory experiences are just as disruptive to attention as real ones: "The crowding [*frequentia*], the walking around, the loud noise [*stremito*] that people make, is bothersome, and weakens the signs of the images, which instead solitude preserves whole" (Gesualdo 19v).

The *images*, on the other hand, had to be lifelike, animated, emotionally charged, weird: anything that would capture the attention of the specific practitioner. "Your rule then will be: the image needs to be wondrous [*maravigliosa*], delightful, ridiculous, or cruel, of rare quality, and shy, marvelous [*maravigliosa* again] that is, atrocious and cruel in its gestures, with a surprised face, and full of sadness" (Dolce 93). For example, to remember the four cardinal virtues (which is always useful), i.e. prudence, fortitude, justice, temperance, I would not resort to their "basic" symbols only (snake, sword, scales, cups), because my attention would skip over such boring everyday objects. I would instead compose images expressing my own, personal connections to each. For instance, prudence would be represented by a snake with the face of my dear friend Fabio, who checks the weather even to go get his car in the parking lot; I would picture him while trying to catch a flying fish in the air (*carpe diem*, for the Italian speaking folks). Fortitude would be represented by Lucio Dalla, dressed in basketball attire (Fortitudo being Bologna's team) while slashing the ball with a sword. And so on. These are images able to recall the item I need immediately, thanks to my own experience of reality, my own attachments, and their entertaining nature.

Bringing together the two aspects of the technique, I could try and memorize Aristotle's rhetorical proofs. That would entail translating each of them (logos, ethos, pathos) into images relevant specifically to me (cruel Apollon shooting arrows, the final shot of the flag-bearing woman in Pudovkin's *Mother*, and a crying Ridge from the telenovela *Beautiful*); then placing them in a space I can navigate easily, like the Academy fourth floor, in an orderly fashion, one for each office. I would then be able to remember the order of the images, because I would tie that to the order of a place that is already internalized in my system. And I would easily recall the notions that the images represent thanks to the instinctual associations that years of questionable education have produced

in me.

Embodiment is fundamental to the process of data internalization. My imagined body navigates the fourth floor instinctively, moving at a natural pace and knowing what to do without conscious thought. In contrast, the images demand attention: "Once you placed them [the human figures for the imagines], you need to contemplate them with the mind's eye as if they were alive, and walk by them multiple times, and touch them with your hands, and call them ... many times" (Marta 19). Their movements, sounds, and emotional resonance captivate me, urging me to question their presence—in short, to interpret them. This process is especially tuned to be quick and precise, two main characteristics of good improvisational composition. In fact, despite the authors of manuals suggesting that their reader produce a series of exciting, interesting, in a word moving images—these are there to elicit thinking, not merely sensory perception. Their being “sensory”, their activating physiological and emotional responses, is here thus coterminous with the highest, most intellectual activities that humans can produce, be it literary composition, sacred meditation, or mathematical reasoning.

3. Temporary conclusions

As anticipated, the Arts of Memory rested on three assumptions already glimpsed in practice. First, memory derives from sensory perception—that is the natural route for knowledge, all knowledge, even the most abstract and conceptual. Second, memory is the product of a selective and transformative process: not every stimulus becomes a memory (and when it does, the latter is not entirely physical). Third, memories are not simply stored, but they are stored for reuse. Their goal is that of being recuperated, an operation that can happen intentionally—called *reminiscentia*, or recall.

Put differently, the Arts I analyze aim to accelerate *reminiscentia* by encoding ideas in forms that the body can access—through movement, gesture, and emotional intensity. This intervention on memory creates not just associations of ideas, but patterns of thought and readiness to act. In this light, the memory palace and the fencing hall are not so different: both cultivate structured responsiveness, rooted in the body yet oriented toward judgment. As Machiavelli understood, the formation of virtue—especially civic virtue—could not rely on rational instruction alone. It had to be trained into the flesh, through repetition and ritual, until it became instinct. The epistemological practices I explore here testify to a broader early modern belief: that the path to moral and political transformation passes through the body, and that the body, when properly trained, can remember, and even think.

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