

XV. Of the Preservation of Knowledge

(1) The custody or retaining of knowledge is either in writing or memory; whereof writing hath two parts, the nature of the character and the order of the entry. For the art of characters, or other visible notes of words or things, it hath nearest conjugation with grammar, and, therefore, I refer it to the due place; for the disposition and collocation of that knowledge which we preserve in writing, it consisteth in a good digest of common-places, wherein I am not ignorant of the prejudice imputed to the use of common-place books, as causing a retardation of reading, and some sloth or relaxation of memory. But because it is but a counterfeit thing in knowledges to be forward and pregnant, except a man be deep and full, I hold the entry of common-places to be a matter of great use and essence in studying, as that which assureth copy of invention, and contracteth judgment to a strength. But this is true, that of the methods of common-places that I have seen, there is none of any sufficient worth, all of them carrying merely the face of a school and not of a world; and referring to vulgar matters and pedantical divisions, without all life or respect to action.

(2) For the other principal part of the custody of knowledge, which is memory, I find that faculty in my judgment weakly inquired of. An art there is extant of it; but it seemeth to me that there are better precepts than that art, and better practices of that art than those received. It is certain the art (as it is) may be raised to points of ostentation prodigious; but in use (as is now managed) it is barren, not burdensome, nor dangerous to natural memory, as is imagined, but barren, that is, not dexterous to be applied to the serious use of business and occasions. And, therefore, I make no more estimation of repeating a great number of names or words upon once hearing, or the pouring forth of a number of verses or rhymes *extempore*, or the making of a satirical simile of everything, or the turning of everything to a jest, or the falsifying or contradicting of everything by cavil, or the like (whereof in the faculties of the mind there is great copy, and such as by device and practice may be exalted to an extreme degree of wonder), than I do of the tricks of tumblers, funambuloes, baladines; the one being the same in the mind that the other is in the body, matters of strangeness without worthiness.

(3) This art of memory is but built upon two intentions; the one prenotion, the other emblem. Prenotion dischargeth the indefinite seeking of that we would remember, and directeth us to seek in a narrow compass, that is, somewhat that hath congruity with our place of memory. Emblem reduceth conceits intellectual to images sensible, which strike the memory more; out of which axioms may be drawn much better practice than that in use; and besides which axioms, there are divers more touching help of memory not inferior to them. But I did in the beginning distinguish, not to report those things deficient, which are but only ill managed.

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