

***Inter fragmenta nare:***  
**Leon Battista Alberti and the Wreck of Memory**

Elisa Bacchi  
elisa.bacchi@gmail.com

As it is well known, rhetoric serves as a theoretical framework for the foundation of artistic practices in the works of Leon Battista Alberti. The structural significance of rhetoric also concerns the conceptualization of the relationship between time, space, and memory. In Alberti's perspective, ruins and fragments from the past are material incarnations of rhetorical-mnemonic *imagines agentes*: their power to affect the mind depends on the ability of the observer to put them in the right places (*loci*).

Against this background, Alberti partially overturns the classical model of the *ars memoriae*: the *a priori* architectural order of *loci* becomes the result of an activity of composition and combination, in which the *imagines*/ruins disrupt the flow of time and the continuum of space by displaying their specific nature as memory traces.

Keywords: Alberti; *Compositio*; Memory; Rhetoric; Ruins

## *Inter fragmenta nare:*

### Leon Battista Alberti and the Wreck of Memory

Elisa Bacchi

elisa.bacchi@gmail.com

In a well-known passage from *Profugiorum ab erumna libri*, Leon Battista Alberti describes the mythical origin of mosaic to illustrate the work of composition performed by eloquent speaker Agnolo di Filippo Pandolfini<sup>1</sup>:

E tanta copia di varie, degnissime e rarissime cose accolte da lui, diremole noi non esposte in luogo e porte e assettate dove bello si condicea e convenia? [...]. E quello che a me pare da pregiare in chi scrive o come voi qui disputa e ragiona di queste dottrine dovute a virtù e atte a viver bene e beato, Agnolo, si è quello che in prima in voi mi parse bellissimo. Non so se fu Cipreste, del quale Vitruvio scrive tanta lode, o se fu altro architetto inventore di questo pingere e figurare, come oggi fanno, el pavimento. Ma costui qualunque e' fu trovatore di cosa sì vezzosa, forse fu a quel tempio ornatissimo di <Efeso>, quale tutta l'Asia construsse in anni non meno che settecento; e vide costui a tanto edificio coacervati e accresciuti e' suoi parieti con squarci grandissimi di monti marmorei, e videvi di qua e di là colonne altissime; e videvi sopra imposti e' travamenti e la copertura fatta di bronzo e inaurata; e vide che dentro e fuori erano e' gran tavolati di porfiro e diaspro a suoi luoghi distinti e applicati, e ogni cosa gli si porgea splendido; e miravavi ogni sua parte collustrata e piena di maraviglie: solo el spazzo stava sotto e' piedi nudo e negletto. Adunque, e per coadornare e per variare el pavimento dagli altri affacciati del tempio, tolse que' minuti rottami rimasi da' marmi, porfidi e diaspri di tutta la struttura, e coattatogli insieme, secondo e' loro colori e quadre compose quella e quell'altra pittura, vestendone e onestandone tutto el pavimento [...]. Ma chi sarà sì fastidioso che non approvi e lodi costui, quale in sì compositissima opera pose sua industria e diligenza? E noi, Agnolo, che vediamo raccolto da voi ciò che presso di tutti gli altri scrittori era disseminato e trito, e sentiamo tante cose tante varie poste in uno e coattate e insite e ammarginate insieme, tutte corrispondere a un tuono, tutte aguagliarsi a un piano, tutte estendersi a una linea, tutte conformarsi a un disegno, non solo più nulla qui desideriamo, né solo ve ne approviamo e lodiamo, ma e molto ve ne abbiamo grazia e merito<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> On the importance of the mosaic metaphor in Alberti's literary theory see R. Cardini, *Mosaici: il "nemico" dell'Alberti*, Bulzoni, Roma 1990; N. Bianchi-Bensimon, "Nihil dictum quin prius dictum": analyse de la méthode compositive chez Leon Battista Alberti, in D. Boillet, D. Moncond'huy (éd. par) *La constitution du texte: le tout et les parties, Renaissance-Age classique*, in "La Licorne", XLVI, 1998, pp. 109-126.

<sup>2</sup> L.B. Alberti, *Profugiorum ab aerumna libri*, a cura di G. Ponte, Tilgher, Genova 1988, pp. 80-83.

The comparison between mosaic and speech originates from ancient rhetorical theory. It defines the features of *compositio*, the part of *ornatus* concerning the position, combination, and rhythmic value of words within a sentence<sup>3</sup>. Like the *tesserulae* of the *emblema vermiculatum*, the words making up the sentence should form a coherent structure, where, without any evident crack, individual tiles merge into a harmonious unity<sup>4</sup>. However, the mosaic metaphor can also assume a negative connotation when the orator focuses more on each small rhythmic fragment than on the flowing effect of the whole<sup>5</sup>. In the *Institutio oratoria*, the polemical use of the metaphor is related to *ars memoriae*: *loci communes* are useful memory aids, but they become mere external ornaments – *emblemata* – when they do not correspond to the specific purpose of the speech<sup>6</sup>. Incorporation of memory-stocked materials into new contexts requires the orator's ability to preserve the fluency of the speech by redefining, from time to time, the form and the placement of the inserted elements. According to Quintilian, artificial memory can indeed hinder the effectiveness of the speaker's performance: the constant effort to associate every single word with an image might interfere with the perception of the speech as a coherent whole<sup>7</sup>. A well-structured *compositio* is then the reflex of a well-structured memory.

Alberti is fully aware of this classical tradition when he employs the mosaic metaphor. In *Profugiorum ab erumna libri* both the positive and negative connotations of the mosaic image are at play: Alberti seems to engage with the rhetorical concept of *compositio* from a perspective that includes the temporal dimension of memory<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> E. MacPhail, *The Mosaic of Speech: a Classical Topos in Renaissance Aesthetics*, in "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", LXVI, 2003, pp. 249-264; T. Golsenne, *Théorie de la mosaïque: invention et ornement chez Alberti*, in "Albertiana", XXI/1, 2018, pp. 37-66; E. Bacchi, *Strategie dello sguardo/strategie della parola: specchio, finestra e velo nel "De pictura" di Leon Battista Alberti*, in A. Casadei, F. Fedi, A. Torre (a cura di) *Letteratura e Scienze. Atti del XXIII Congresso dell'Associazione degli italianisti*, Pisa, 12-14 settembre 2019, Adi editore, Roma 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Cic., *Brut.*, 274: «quae primum ita pura erat ut nihil liquidius, ita libere fluebat ut nusquam adhaeresceret; nullum nisi loco positum et tamquam in vermiculato emblemate, ut ait Lucilius, structum verbum videres». Cf. also Cic., *De orat.*, III, 171.

<sup>5</sup> Cic., *Orat.*, 149: «fiat quasi structura quaedam nec tamen fiat operose; nam esset cum infinitus tum puerilis labor; quod apud Lucilium scite exagitat in Albucio Scaevola: "quam lepide lexis compostae ut tesserulae omnes arte pavimento atque emblemate vermiculato!". Nolo haec tam minuta constructio appareat; sed tamen stilus exercitatus efficiet facile formulam componendi». Cf. also Quint., *Inst.*, IX, 4, 112.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *ivi*, II, 4, 27-28.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *ivi*, XI, 2, 26.

<sup>8</sup> The semantic field of the mosaic is recalled in Alberti's quote from Terentius: «nihil dictum quin prius dictum» (cf. L.B. Alberti, *Profugiorum ab erumna libri*, cit., p. 83 and L.B. Alberti, *Momus*, testo,

Agnolo's compositional skills are certainly an exception in his own time. Still, Alberti's attention primarily focuses on the radical difference between the task of Cipreste, the mythical inventor of mosaic, and the work of post-classical writers:

Gl'ingegni d'Asia e massime e' Greci, in più anni, tutti insieme furono inventori di tutte l'arte e discipline; e costrussero uno quasi tempio e domicilio in suoi scritti a Pallade e a quella Pronea, dea de' filosofi stoici, ed estesero e' pareti colla investigazione del vero e del falso; statuironvi le colonne col discernere e annotare gli effetti e forze della natura, apposervi el tetto quale difendesse tanta opera dalle tempeste avverse; e questa fu la perizia di fuggire el male, e appetire e conseguire el bene, e odiare el vizio, chiedere e amare la virtù. Ma che interviene? Proprio el contrario da quel di sopra. Colui [Cipreste] accolse e' minuti rimasugli, e composene el pavimento. Noi vero, dove io come colui e come quell'altro volli ornare un mio picciolo e privato diversorio, tolsi da quel pubblico e nobilissimo edificio quel che mi parse accommodato a' miei disegni, e divisilo in più particelle distribuendole ove a me parse. E quindi nacque come e' dicono: "Nihil dictum quin prius dictum". E veggonsi queste cose litterarie usurpate da tanti, e in tanti loro scritti adoperate e disseminate, che oggi a chi voglia ragionarne resta altro nulla che solo el raccogliere e assortirle e poi accoppiarle insieme con qualche varietà dagli altri e adattezza dell'opera sua, quasi come suo istituto sia imitare in questo chi altrove fece el pavimento<sup>9</sup>.

Alberti's use of the mosaic metaphor goes beyond a mere expression of imitative eclecticism and reveals a complex stratification of meaning. First and foremost, it points out the metamorphoses that time has brought along in its passage.

In classical antiquity, mosaics were made out of collected raw materials, left over from the accomplishment of the fully developed building. They were additions completing, but not altering the architectural structure. In Alberti's time, literary mosaic represents the outcome of a progressive process of decay: the original architecture turns into ruins over time due to human *incuria*, and its remaining fragments become mosaic tiles, forcibly torn from their previous places. The three-dimensional structure of the temple and its architectural order are reorganized in the space of a private ornamental surface where ancient knowledge (Pallas), together with its orientation towards practical wisdom and memory (Pronoia as *prudentia* and *praevidentia*), is definitively lost.

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traduzione e note a cura di M.L. Bracciali Magnini, in Id. *Opere latine*, a cura di R. Cardini, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma 2010, p. 1042). In the *Momus*, the *adagium* points out the interplay between a new compositional order and the deconstructive power of the *risus* which reorganizes ancient pieces of knowledge by playing with their memory-oriented architectural structure. According to Alberti, the formal process of *compositio* gives birth to a brand new space where the *festivitas* acts simultaneously as a destabilizing element and organizing principle.

<sup>9</sup> L.B. Alberti, *Profugiorum ab aerumna libri*, cit., pp. 82-83.

What distinguishes Agnolo's collecting activity is his ability to engage with the scraps of the past, recognizing them not merely as heterogeneous fragments but also as memory traces. His *compositio* transforms the private ornament of mosaic, where each individual tile stands for itself, into a temporally layered surface that recalls the ancient building by considering the material time of its alteration and ruin. Agnolo's mosaic can be a «forma e pictura» without any «grave fissura»<sup>10</sup> since he is aware of the recomposing and comparing function of memory, which imaginatively rebuilds an architectural space from the temporal movement of *vestigia*. The newfound fluency of his mosaic speech consists in transforming each word-tile into an irradiating spectrum of possibilities made available by the passage of time.

The architectural dynamic of disgregation and reconstruction holds significant symbolic value in Alberti's works since it vividly represents the precarious subsistence of material and mental spaces<sup>11</sup>. Beyond the obvious reference to *De re aedificatoria*, it is impossible not to mention the numerous temples of the *Intercenales*. In *Picture* and *Anuli*<sup>12</sup>, the temples of Good and Bad Fortune and the temple of Minerva seem to represent two perfect doubles of the temple of Pronoia and Pallas in *Profugiorum ab erumna libri*. First, they are dedicated to the same deities: Pronoia is none other than the knowledge of good and bad fortune; Pallas is the Greek attribute of Athena/Minerva. Secondly, they are structured as *loci memoriae* where the *imagines agentes* are methodically placed to construct a didactic *itinerarium animi* towards wisdom<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*: «Qual cose, dove io le veggo aggiunte insieme in modo che le convengano con suoi colori a certa prescritta e designata forma e pittura, e dove io veggo fra loro niuna grave fissura, niuna deforme vacuità, mi diletta, e iudico nulla più doversi desiderare».

<sup>11</sup> A.G. Cassani, *La fatica del costruire: tempo e materia nel pensiero di Leon Battista Alberti*, Unicopli, Milano 2000 effectively points out the interplay of construction, destruction, and time in Alberti's work.

<sup>12</sup> L.B. Alberti, *Intercenales*, a cura di R. Cardini; trad. it. M.L. Bracciali Magnini, Polistampa, Firenze 2022, pp. 90-96 and pp. 472-489.

<sup>13</sup> On the medieval and Renaissance legacy of classical mnemonics based on *loci* and *imagines*, see F. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1966. M. Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought. Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1998, focuses on the relationship between *ars memoriae* and architectural structure. According to A. Torre, *La memoria dipinta. Corpi, stanze e palazzi nel codice BSG 3368*, in *L'artificial memoria (Paris, Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Ms. 3368). Riproduzione anastatica e saggi di commento*, a cura di F. Pich e A. Torre, La Stanza delle Scritture, Napoli 2017, pp. 231-262, early modern theories of perspective produce a radical transformation in the spatial organization of memory: «Il passaggio da una rappresentazione frontale e sostanzialmente bidimensionale [...] a un'immagine elaborata per amplificazione dei piani prospettici contribuisce a intensificare la percezione di un moto di ingresso nell'illustrazione, e costituisce un'efficace forma simbolica della dialettica *intus-extra* costitutiva di ogni arte della memoria», pp. 255-256. Alberti's application of the technique based on *loci* and *imagines* in *Picture* and *Anuli* has been partially investigated by P. Laurens, «*Fiunt singula connexa quodam choro*» (*Quintilien, XI 2 20*): *la fabrique de la morale dans les "Anuli" de L.B. Alberti*, in F. Furlan (éd. par) Leon

However, their univocal moral function is constantly threatened by a sense of instability, which invests both the invention and disposition of the images (*imagines*) and, more radically, the possibility of building a persistent and polyfunctional system of places (*loci*) as a pre-condition for the ethical and mnemonic journey.

The paintings of the temple of *Picture*, arranged on two opposite walls displaying the causes and consequences of fortune and misfortune, indeed represent the innate duplicity of the human soul and its continuous fluctuation between ruin (*Ruina*) and the attempt to endure (*Immortalitas*). In *Anuli*, the symbolic images invented by Philoponius result from a collection and re-composition of disparate fragments. Nevertheless, their hieroglyphic *sapientia*, which opens the doors of the temple of Minerva to Philoponius, is blurred by the impossibility of fully discerning their true meaning, lost in the flowing river from which Philoponius draws his raw materials. The ambiguity of these two temples is confirmed by the catastrophic collapse of the temple described in the table talk *Hedera*<sup>14</sup>, which foreshadows the ruin of the temple where Momus, disguised as ivy, lies with Laus, daughter of Virtus, giving birth to the monstrous hybrid of Fama, the crossbreed of memory and chance<sup>15</sup>.

The first dialogue of *Profugiorum ab erumna libri* also takes place inside an excellent temple, the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore. Agnolo describes it as a space where opposing architectural qualities find a perfect balance, and where the eye's astonishment leads to the appeasement of the spirit<sup>16</sup>. The poor practical effectiveness of this architectural representation of a well-organized soul is pointed out by Nicola di Vieri de'

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Battista Alberti: *Actes du Congrès International de Paris, 10-15 avril 1995*, Vrin-Aragno, Paris-Torino 2000, pp. 527-542. D. Marsh (*Alberti and the Symbolic Thinking: Prolegomena to the Dialogue "Anuli"*, in A. Calzona, F.P. Fiore, A. Tenenti, C. Vasoli (a cura di) *Leon Battista Alberti: teorico delle arti e gli impegni civili del "De re aedificatoria"*. *Atti dei Convegni internazionali del Comitato Nazionale VI centenario della nascita di Leon Battista Alberti, Mantova, Ottobre 2002-Ottobre 2003*, Olschki, Firenze 2007, p. 14) suggests that, by describing the temple of Good and Bad Fortune in *Picture*, «Alberti echoes the title of *De remediis utriusque fortune*» by Francesco Petrarca, which L. Bolzoni (*Memoria e oblio nel "De remediis" di Petrarca e un'immagine di Sebastian Brant*, in Ead., *Il lettore creativo: percorsi cinquecenteschi fra memoria, gioco e scrittura*, Guida, Napoli 2012, pp. 85-107) describes as a mnemonic *itinerarium*. Moreover both *Picture* and *Anuli* share a close relationship with the tradition of Renaissance emblems (Cf. D. Marsh, *Visualizing Virtue: Alberti and the Early Renaissance Emblem*, in "Albertiana", VI, 2003, pp. 7-26), whose memory-aid function is highlighted by L. Bolzoni, *Emblemi e arte della memoria: alcune note su invenzione e ricezione*, in Ead., *Il lettore creativo*, cit., pp. 109-131.

<sup>14</sup> L.B. Alberti, *Intercenales*, cit. p. 106.

<sup>15</sup> L.B. Alberti, *Momus*, testo, traduzione e note a cura di M.L. Bracciali Magnini, in Id. *Opere latine*, a cura di R. Cardini, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma 2010, pp. 1058-1060.

<sup>16</sup> The moral and rhetorical significance of the architectural background of *Profugiorum ab erumna libri* is pointed out by C. Smith, *Architecture in the Culture of Early Humanism: Ethics, Aesthetics and Eloquence 1400-1470*, Oxford University Press, New York 1992, pp. 3-18 and pp. 80-97.

Medici, who challenges Agnolo to build, with words, a more resistant refuge from spiritual restlessness. From this point of view, Agnolo's speech seems indeed to be a more appropriate construction. Despite the gradual ruin of the ancient temple of Minerva-Pronoia, Agnolo's mosaic saves its memory by preserving its crumbling process: it paves the way for transformation by working on fractures. The mosaic speech represents the true *itinerarium animi* as *itinerarium memoriae* and its ornamental quality – its ability to reflect the movement of time – becomes its structural feature<sup>17</sup>: the static space to go through and fill in with effective images converts into an image of space resulting from the juxtaposition of time fragments.

Alberti had previously praised the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore. In the dedication letter of the vernacular version of the *De pictura*, he expressed his admiration for the dome designed by Brunelleschi. The groundbreaking innovation of Brunelleschi's *cupola* served as a fitting symbol for Alberti's own development of pictorial theory. While much of ancient knowledge and many ancient monuments had been ruined or lost, Alberti believed that human *industria* and *diligentia* could produce astonishing novelties by challenging the insufficiency and limits of subsistent models and exemplars<sup>18</sup>. A new art of painting needed to be grounded on a new relationship between invention and memory since neither Pliny nor the ancient painters could provide the rules for the game Alberti was playing<sup>19</sup>. From this point of view, the fiction about the origin and transformation of mosaic stands as a theoretical illustration of the functioning of visual arts in general.

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<sup>17</sup> At the end of *Profugiorum ab erumna libri*, Agnolo finds relief for his soul only in the imaginative construction of architectural mosaics. L.B. Alberti, *Profugiorum ab aerumna libri*, cit., pp. 114-115: «Cosa niuna tanto mi disdice da mia vessazione d'animo, né tanto mi contiene in quiete e tranquillità di mente, quanto occupare e' miei pensieri in qualche degna faccenda e adoperarmi in qualche ardua e rara pervestigazione [...]. E talora [...] composi a mente e coedificai qualche compositissimo edificio, e disposivi più ordini e numeri di colonne con vari capitelli e base inusitate, e collega'vi conveniente e nuova grazia di cornici e tavolati».

<sup>18</sup> L.B. Alberti, *De pictura (redazione volgare)*, a cura di L. Bertolini, Polistampa, Firenze 2011, pp. 203-204: «Pertanto m'avidi in nostra industria e diligenza non meno che in beneficio della natura e de' tempi stare il potere acquistarsi ogni laude di qual si sia virtù. Confessoti sì a quegli antiqui, avendo quale aveano copia da chi imparare e imitarli, meno era difficile salire in cognizione di quelle supreme arti quali oggi a noi sono faticosissime; ma quinci tanto più el nostro nome più debba essere maggi ore, se noi senza precettori, senza essemplio alcuno, troviamo arti e scienze non udite e mai vedute. Chi mai sì duro o sì invido non lodasse Pippo architetto [Filippo Brunelleschi] vedendo qui struttura sì grande, erta sopra e' cieli, ampla da coprire con sua ombra tutti e' popoli toscani, fatta senza alcuno aiuto di travamenti o di copia di legname, quale artificio certo, se io ben iudico, come a questi tempi era incredibile potersi, così forse appresso gli antichi fu non saputo né conosciuto?»

<sup>19</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 242-243 and p. 252.

According to Baxandall, the narrative representation of painting (*historia*) emerges through a rhetorical process of *compositio* wherein surfaces, members, and bodies are arranged following the rules of *comma*, *cola*, and *periodos*<sup>20</sup>. As a metaphor for rhetorical *compositio*, the mosaic imposes its structure on the painting itself<sup>21</sup>: if the mosaic is a «forma e pictura» without evident cracks, the painting can easily be considered as a mosaic making use of *tesserulae* to encompass a three-dimensional space within a surface. In the case of painting, as with mosaic, fragmentation cannot be regarded as a fact, but as a process that begins with the transformation of an architectural element, namely the frame of the windows from which the painter looks out, into a symbolic one<sup>22</sup>. The framing function of the windows makes the gaze of the painter-observer the organizing center of the space of representation<sup>23</sup>. Three-dimensional space is thus deconstructed into a temporal object representing the painter-observer's internal perceptual and imaginative process, where physiological and cultural components converge<sup>24</sup>.

The non-expert painter can make use of a technical device that simulates the decomposition and recomposition taking place on the pictorial surface:

Egli è uno velo sottilissimo, tessuto raro, tinto di quale a te piace colore, distinto con fili più grossi in quanti a te piace paralleli, qual velo pongo tra l'occhio e la cosa veduta: tale che la piramide visiva penetra per la rarità del velo. Porgeti questo velo certo non picciola commodità: primo, che sempre ti ripresenta medesima non mossa superficie, dove tu, posti certi termini, subito ritruovi la vera cuspide della piramide, qual cosa certo senza intercisione sarebbe difficile [...]. L'altra sarà utilità che tu potrai facile costituire i termini degli orli e delle superficie. Ove in questo paralelo vedrai il fronte, in quello e il naso, in un altro le guance, in quel di sotto il mento, e così ogni cosa distinto ne' suoi luoghi: così tu nella tavola o in parete vedi divisa in simili paraleli, ogni cosa a punto potrai<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. M. Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanists Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition, 1350-1450*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1971, pp.121-139.

<sup>21</sup> For the application of Alberti's mosaic model to the analysis of pictorial composition see T. Golsenne, *Théorie de la mosaïque: invention et ornement chez Alberti*, cit.; E. Bacchi, *Strategie dello sguardo/strategie della parola*, cit.

<sup>22</sup> On the symbolic meaning of the window in Alberti's thought see A. Nicolosi, *La finestra svelata: Alberti e l'anima delle immagini*, Mimesis, Milano 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Concerning this process, H. Belting, *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science*, transl. by D.L. Schneider, Belknap, Cambridge-London 2011, pp. 129- 252 discusses a shift from the theory of vision to a theory of the image.

<sup>24</sup> Alberti's awareness of the complex cognitive process of vision is pointed out by P. Roccasecca, *Filosofi oratori e poeti: una nuova lettura del "De pictura" di Leon Battista Alberti*, Campisano, Roma 2016, pp. 236-238

<sup>25</sup> L.B. Alberti, *De pictura*, cit., pp. 261-262.

The veil is both a useful practical *adminiculum* and a system of *loci* whose memorization helps to train the *ingenium* and whose stability depends on the position of the eye of the painter who experiments with distances and produces a perspectival perception of the architectural space changing with his movements. Unlike the abstract and purely mental practice of the classical *loci memoriae*, Alberti's *loci picturae* operate into a material and physical space by transforming it into a memory space: kinaesthetic praxis mediates the understanding of proportions as relational functions, imprinted in the memory through the continuous meditation and multiple annotations of stored fragments<sup>26</sup>. Their *compositio* reorganizes different layers of memory into a single effective movement getting its dynamism from temporal stratifications which the careful observer perceives as footprints to follow.

While Brunelleschi's dome raises the issue of the relationship between invention and memory, Alberti's window resolves it on the ground of the collecting and recomposing practice, showing the close relationship between painting and architecture<sup>27</sup>.

The very conceptualization of architecture passes indeed through the rhetorical category of *compositio*. In *De re aedificatoria*, the three components that constitute *ornamentum* – *numerus*, *finitio*, and *collocatio*, which merge into *concininitas* – display structural similarities to the properties of rhetorical *compositio*, which Cicero terms as

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. *ivi*, pp. 305-307 : «Voglio che i giovani, quali ora nuovi si danno a dipignere, così facciano quanto veggio di chi impara a scrivere: questi in prima separato insegnano tutte le forme delle lettere, quali gli antiqui chiamano elementi; poi insegnano le silabe; poi apresso insegnano componere tutte le dizioni. Con questa ragione ancora seguitino i nostri a dipignere: in prima imparino ben disegnare gli orli delle superficie e qui se esercitino quasi come ne' primi elementi della pittura; poi imparino giugnere insieme le superficie, poi imparino ciascuna forma distinta di ciascuno membro e mandino a mente qualunque possa essere differenza in ciascuno membro [...]. Così tutte queste cose lo studioso pittore conoscerà dalla natura, e con sé stessi molto assiduo le esaminerà, in che modo ciascuna stia, e continuo starà in questa investigazione e opera desto con suo ochi e mente». Cf. also *ivi*, pp. 317-318 : «E quando aremo a dipignere storia, prima fra noi molto penseremo qual modo e quale ordine in quella sia bellissimo e faremo nostri concetti e modelli, di tutta la storia e di ciascuna sua parte [...]. E così ci sforzeremo avere ogni parte in noi prima ben pensata: tale che nella opera abbi a essere cosa alcuna, quale non intendiamo ove e come debba essere fatta e collocata. E per meglio di tutto aver certezza, segneremo i modelli nostri con paraleli, onde nel publico lavoro torremo dai nostri congetti, quasi come da privati commentari, ogni stanza e sito delle cose». On the role of memory in Alberti's *De pictura* and its connection with the rhetorical *ars memoriae* see P. Roccasecca, *Filosofi, oratori e poeti*, cit., pp. 333- 336.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *ivi*, p. 250 : «E chi dubita qui presso la pittura essere maestra, o certo non picciolo ornamento a tutte le cose? Prese l'architetto, se io non erro, pure dal pittore li architravi, le base, i capitelli, le colonne, frontispicii e simili tutte altre cose». Cf. also L.B. Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, a cura di G. Orlandi, Il Polifilo, Milano 1966, p. 529 (VII, 1) : «Habebit quidem hæc disquisitio [about architectural ornament] utilitatis tantum: ut ea ne pictores quidem venustatum exquisitissimi sectatores ullo pacto sibi carent dum esse affirmaturi sint».

*collocatio* – *compositio*, *concinntas*, *numerus*<sup>28</sup>. Alberti sees architectural *ornamentum* as a *complementum*<sup>29</sup>, which exhibits potentially endless variations and possibilities for recombination<sup>30</sup>. He emphasizes that even nature's imperfections – «raroque vel ipsi naturae cuiquam concessum ut in medium proferat, quod plane absolutum atque omni ex parte perfectum sit»<sup>31</sup> – need to be fixed through an investigation and collection of *dispersa* and *disseminata* traces (*vestigia*)<sup>32</sup>. Furthermore, nature itself undergoes continuous assessment through the investigation of the *vestigia antiquitatis*:

Nihil usque erat antiquorum operum in quo aliqua laus elucesceret: quin ilico ex eo pervestigarem siquid possem perdiscere. Ergo rimari omnia, considerare, metiri, lineamentis picturae colligere nusquam intermittebam quoad funditus quid quisque attulisset ingenii aut artis prehenderem atque pernoscerem<sup>33</sup>.

The primary skill of an expert architect lies in the ability to foresee (*praevidere*) any factor that might threaten the lifespan of a building. Experience, reflection, and manipulation of *vestigia* generate clues (*inditia*) that take on distinct meanings depending on the context. They serve as signs of the interplay between natural processes, human activity, and memory organization<sup>34</sup>. Their fragmented superficial appearance is the symptom of a

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *ivi*, p. 813-815 (IX, 5). The three properties of *compositio/collocatio* are exposed in Cic., *Orat.*, 149. An actual comparison between rhetorical *compositio* and architecture has been carried out by the Greek rhetorician Dionysius of di Halicarnassus in his *De compositione verborum* (1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.). The Byzantine scholar Geroge of Trebizond popularized the metaphor within Italian humanist circles through his *Rhetoricorum libri quinque* (1435). The influence of rhetorical theory on Alberti's concept of *ornamentum* is emphasized by H.G. Lücke, *Alberti, Vitruvio e Cicerone*, in J. Rykwert, A. Engel (a cura di) *Leon Battista Alberti. Catalogo della mostra, Mantova, 10 settembre – 11 dicembre 1994*, Electa, Milano 1994, pp. 70-95; V. Biermann, *Ornamentum. Studien zum Traktat "De re aedificatoria" des Leon Battista Alberti*, Olms, Hildesheim 1995; E. Di Stefano, *L'altro sapere: bello, arte, immagine in Leon Battista Alberti*, Centro internazionale studi di estetica, Palermo 2000, pp. 41-51; M. Bulgarelli, *Leon Battista Alberti, 1404-1472: architettura e storia*, Electa, Milano 2008, pp. 9-36; C. Lepraik Guest, *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2016, pp. 173-194.

<sup>29</sup> L.B. Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, cit., p. 449 (VI, 2).

<sup>30</sup> *Ivi*, p. 545 (VII, 3): «Infinita enim res ornamentum est».

<sup>31</sup> *Ivi*, p. 449 (VI, 2).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *ivi*, p. 453 (VI, 3): «Omnia tentavit naturae vestigia lustrans and repetens [...]. Adiunxit, detraxit, aequavit maiora minoribus, similia dissimilibus, prima ultimis». Cf. also *ivi*, p. 857 (IX, 10): «eoque pacto non dispersas modo et quasi disseminatas, verum etiam intimis penetralibus, ut ita loquar, naturae conditas laudes omnes colligit animoque concipiet».

<sup>33</sup> *Ivi*, p. 443 (VI, 1).

<sup>34</sup> Knowledge through *inditia* plays a key role in the first, third, and final book of *De re aedificatoria*. About the significance of the conjectural paradigm in Alberti's work see A.G. Cassani, *Leon Battista Alberti e il metodo indiziario*, in "Studi rinascimentali", XVIII, 2020, pp. 65-78.

hidden time that the «industriosi artefici» bring back into use<sup>35</sup>. In fact, the passage of time has its own alphabet; cracks and fissures in buildings are akin to letters in a stone text: they force memory to confront material absence by attempting to provide a grammar and a syntax to the absence itself<sup>36</sup>. From this perspective, Nature and Antiquity do not function as separate and immutable models, but as relational phenomena, whose interaction involves the movement of memory, which reconstructs into a new image the elapsed time, its passage, and its remnants.

If the continual oscillation between the visible and invisible, presence and absence, is the primary characteristic of human existence, it can, nonetheless, transform humanity's effort to give shape to the world into the catastrophe of a limitless desire for meaning:

Nascose la natura e' metalli, nascose l'oro e l'altre minere sotto grandissimi monti e ne' luoghi desertissimi. Noi frugoli omicciuoli lo producemmo in luce e ponemmolo fra' primi usi. Ella disperse le gemme lucidissime e in forma quanto a lei ottima maestra parse attissima. Noi le raccoglemmo persino dalle ultime ed estremità regioni, e cincischianle, diamoli nuova lima e forma [...]. Eransi fuggiti gli abeti in su e' monti altissimi lungi dal mare: noi li strascinammo non quasi ad altro uso in prima che a marcirlo in mare. Stavansi e' marmi giacendo in terra: noi li collocammo sulle fronti de' templi e sopra a' nostri capi [...]. Inimico capitale di ciò che vede e di quello che non vede, tutte le volle a servitù; inimico della generazione umana, inimico a se stessi<sup>37</sup>.

Here lies the core contradiction of humankind: the natural order is an unintelligible and uninhabitable utopia without the human exercise of interpretation. The craving for time as an uninterrupted presential flow must always face the obstacle posed by human memory as an experience of the past and future.

The symbolic image of *Humanitas*, painted on the wall of the temple of Good and Bad Fortune in the table talk *Picture*, goes some way towards providing a visual explanation of this paradox. It portrays a multi-faced and multi-handed woman; her faces depict various stages of human life and states of mind, while her hands hold the instruments of

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<sup>35</sup> L.B. Alberti, *I libri della famiglia*, a cura di R. Romano, A. Tenenti, F. Furlan, Einaudi, Torino 1994, p. 54: «Furono gl'indizii, furono e' segni per li quali si mossono ad investigare, e co' quali investigando conseguirono, e addussorli in notizia e uso. E tanto potette la industria e diligenza degli uomini che nulla cosa di quelle occultissime più a noi sta non conosciuta»

<sup>36</sup> The entire final book of *De re aedificatoria* is devoted to a semiotics of cracks and fissures aimed at the restoration of deteriorated buildings.

<sup>37</sup> L.B. Alberti, *Theogenius*, in Id., *Opere volgari*, II, a cura di C. Grayson, Laterza, Bari 1966, pp. 93-94.

both the liberal and the mechanical arts<sup>38</sup>. *Humanitas* seems to represent Alberti's variation on the theme of Prudentia, with her classical distinction in *memoria* (past), *intelligentia* (present), and *providentia* (future)<sup>39</sup>, traditionally depicted by humanist artists as a three-headed figure<sup>40</sup>. The numerous hands of *Humanitas* symbolize the union and cooperation of the speculative and the practical arts in the pursuit of earthly happiness<sup>41</sup>. Despite its positive connotations, situated within the domain of Good Fortune, this image retains a degree of ambiguity: the allegorical fusion of Prudentia and Artes falls short of shielding the human soul from the tumultuous succession of the different moods which originate in the perception of time, such as the feelings of both possession and loss. An analogous representation can indeed be found in *De iciarchia*, where the ownership of many eyes and hands becomes an emblem of the disproportionate nature of human desire<sup>42</sup>. In the sea of *bios*, where humankind floats – «noi, prodotti in vita, quasi come la nave, non per marcirsi in porto, ma per sulcare lunghe vie in mare»<sup>43</sup> – the same *imago* flows from one shore to the other, and its meaning coincides with its movement.

The river of *Fatum and Fortuna* vividly illustrates how man can only exist within this ceaseless flux that gradually erodes the form and function of things. The stream of fate operates within an unknown ratio, and there is no safe harbor from which to witness the impending shipwreck<sup>44</sup>. The emerging sharp rocks of fortune seem to be the sole elements that disrupt the current continuum. They provide humankind with a handhold, which, at the same time, turns out to be a stumbling block to run into. Ruins represent, in fact, the form through which time penetrates human consciousness.

Not all wrecks are debris, though. A specific kind of floating fragments can supply a safer grip. They are the remnants of the *artes*, the residue of a once-superimposed

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<sup>38</sup> L.B. Alberti, *Intercenales*, cit., p. 94.

<sup>39</sup> Cic., *Inv.*, II, 160

<sup>40</sup> Cf. E. Panofsky, *Signum tripliciter: Ein hellenistisches Kultsymbol in der Kunst der Renaissance* in Id., *Hercules am Scheidewege und andere antike Bildstoffe in der neueren Kunst*, Teubner, Leipzig 1930, pp. 1-35.

<sup>41</sup> R. Cardini, *Alberti scrittore e umanista*, in *La vita e il mondo di Leon Battista Alberti. Atti dei Convegni internazionali del Comitato Nazionale VI centenario della nascita di Leon Battista Alberti (Genova, 19-21 febbraio 2004)*, Olschki, Firenze 2008, pp. 38-40, emphasizes the role of hands as instruments of *praxis* in Alberti's representation of *Humanitas*.

<sup>42</sup> L.B. Alberti, *De iciarchia*, in Id., *Opere volgari*, cit., p. 275.

<sup>43</sup> L.B. Alberti, *Profugiorum ab aerumna*, cit., p. 40.

<sup>44</sup> On the modern transformation of the classical shipwreck metaphor see H. Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator. Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, transl. by S. Rendall, MIT Press, Cambridge 1996.

systematic organization of knowledge that has succumbed to the material consistency of objects shaped by the time. These *tabulae naufragii* are concrete ruins: they do not symbolize the destructive force of time, nor do they stand for an antidote to it. They rather show persistence as an operative and transformative process:

Id quidem ita eorum merito fit, tum quod tabulas additamentis fragmentorum effecere ampliores, tu etiam quod ex mediis scopulis atque ex ultima ultima ripa pulcherrimum ducunt tabulas ipsas colligere novasque simili quadam ratione et modo struere suasque has omnes operas in medium ceteris natantibus exhibere<sup>45</sup>.

Fragments of antiquity act as mnemonic devices resembling drifting wooden boards, embodying the flow of time and transforming themselves into tools to fulfill human purposes. The rhetorical *evidentia* of ruins presents before the eyes of the observer the picture of something absent that needs to be replaced<sup>46</sup>.

Alberti's theory of *compositio* gives memory a poietic power since it does not set transmission rules but traces the paths for variations. Words within a sentence, pictorial signs, and architectural elements follow the rhetorical paradigm of mosaic: they incorporate the past as a result instead of considering it as a model. Alberti's obsessive representation of the corrosive effects of time is indeed the condition of possibility for opening to memory the space of innovation.

In the second book of *Momus*, the collapse of the magnificent triumphal arch built by Minerva serves as a fitting metaphor for the interplay between time and memory:

[...] illico Iunonis illud vastum et immane tantarum impensarum opus labans corruit, cuius fragore et sonitu subincussa caeli (uti sunt aenea) convexa maximum dedere sonitum, quem ab resonantis testudinis tinnitu exceptum musici notantes ad memoriae posteritatem Iunonis illud caducum fragileque opus Tinim nuncuparunt, at postea corrupto vocabulo Irim vulgo appellarunt<sup>47</sup>.

The resounding echo (*tinnitus*) of the arch's fall establishes a paradoxical cosmic order, ironically alluding to Pythagorean numerical harmonies (Tinim), the memory of which can only be preserved through a material corruption of the name Tinim into Irim. The

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<sup>45</sup> L.B. Alberti, *Intercenales*, cit., p. 26.

<sup>46</sup> L.B. Alberti, *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis*, a cura di M. Regoliosi; trad. it. V. Novembri, in Id., *Opere latine*, cit., p. 46: «Quis non ante oculos veluti pictam rem prospicit casum atque perniciem disciplinarum et artium?»

<sup>47</sup> L.B. Alberti, *Momus*, cit., p. 186.

rainbow (Irim), a visible phenomenon linking heaven and earth, rescues and simultaneously transforms the temporal order of Tinim. Time, as an organizing principle, begins with a *tinnitus* that coincides with erosion (*tinea*)<sup>48</sup>, and its ruins constitute the refracted signs upon which human memory operates.

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<sup>48</sup> For the etymological relationship between *tinnitus* and *tinea* see L.B. Alberti, *Momo, o del principe*, edizione critica e traduzione a cura di R. Consolo; introduzione di A. Di Grado, Costa&Nolan, Genova, 1986, p. 154, n. 54.