Alberto Cevolini.

De arte excerpendi: imparare a dimenticare nella modernità.

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Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2006. Pp. 458.

This is the first book, to my knowledge, explicitly devoted to early modern manuals on excerpting. Recent work has drawn attention to the significance of this method of taking notes by copying out quotations or information from books into notebooks or (especially after the mid-seventeenth century) onto loose leaves or slips of paper, whence they might later be retrieved. Alberto Cevolini, a sociologist at the University of Modena e Reggio Emilia, offers a well-informed analysis of the origins, assumptions, and methods of excerpting in early modern Europe as part of a larger story of modernization in the wake of printing. Alongside this historical argument the book provides extensive translations into Italian from primary sources from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so that readers may acquaint themselves directly with five important texts on how to excerpt—by Francesco Sacchini, Jeremias Drexel, John Locke, Vincent Placcius, and Johann Jakob Moser. The book closes with the translation of a 1981 article, "Kommunikation mit Zettelkasten" ("Communicating with Card Boxes") by Niklas Luhmann (1927–1998), a German sociologist widely known, especially in Europe, for his theory of society as a system of communication. In a concluding "epistola auctoris" Cevolini explains the genesis of the book during a year spent at Bielefeld where Luhmann had been a professor and his influence is strong. Considering Luhmann's description of his own working methods led Cevolini to appreciate the persistent value of excerpting across centuries of scholarly endeavor and led him in particular to the cluster of advice books on excerpting which forms the principal focus of this book.

Cevolini acknowledges the origins of excerpting in ancient and medieval practices, but argues for a radical transformation in the purpose of excerpting and the conception of knowledge in the early modern period. Following Luhmann among others, Cevolini argues that printing spawned modern ways of reading and organizing knowledge which broke with medieval ones: reading shifted from aural and oral to silent and visual, from the intensive reading of a traditional and fixed corpus of sources to the extensive reading of more varied and innovative texts; texts became easier to read as abbreviations were dropped and ambiguities minimized. On Cevolini's account medieval excerpting served to aid the memorization of authoritative passages through repetition; by contrast, early modern excerpting served to relieve the reader of the need to remember the excerpted passages, precisely

because they had been copied out and could be retrieved at will. The collection of excerpts (whether in a commonplace book, in a notebook, or on loose leaves or slips) thus formed a second, external memory, which liberated the reader from the task of memorizing the selected passages and freed up mental capacity previously committed to memorization for other purposes such as reasoning and reflection. Hence the subtitle of this book: “learning to forget in modernity”—forgetting, or foregoing memorization in favor of recording excerpts, is for Cevolini a crucial new skill characteristic of the modern economy of knowledge.

The change in the role of excerpts from passages meant to be memorized to passages meant to be retrieved on a consultation basis triggered the development of finding devices. Cevolini emphasizes the wider and more careful use of alphabetical order in early modern texts as compared to medieval ones and the shift away from a hierarchy of knowledge toward the accumulation of homogeneous bits of material, often alphabetized for convenience and available for reuse in different combinations. As the traditional medieval hierarchy of topics was abandoned, early modern authors devoted renewed attention to the problem of order with an eye to retrievability. One solution was to use cross-references, not in order to avoid repetition (as Cevolini argues was typical in the middle ages) but in order to create multiple paths for exploring a collection of information—this “hypertextual” mode of reading and of storing information marked a significant departure from medieval reading habits.

Cevolini’s account offers the strengths of a “big picture” which is convincing in its broad outline as a pattern of development—say, between the eighth and the eighteenth centuries. But specialists of various kinds may disagree with Cevolini’s assessment of the rhythm and causes of innovation, e.g. between medieval and early modern, between the impact of printing and the impact of other concurrent historical developments, including humanism, or the growth of higher education and of alternative sites of learning (among other possible factors). Cevolini acknowledges that the changes he describes took place over a broad span of time, but he focuses on a largely linear narrative of seemingly inevitable change. As a result he tends to downplay the medieval contribution to modern attitudes as well as potentially contradictory evidence. For example, Sacchini’s manual was reprinted as late as 1785 (as Cevolini points out), and with it with the advice to memorize one’s notes, long after such a “medieval” conception should have been abandoned. Alphabetical order became common in reference books starting in the late seventeenth century, but many users of it (like Chambers or d’Alembert) explicitly sought to palliate its splintering effect, e.g. with cross-references and organizational charts. Indeed the

ideal of a hierarchy of knowledge likely never lost its appeal in modernity, though most encyclopaedias opted for alphabetical order: as late as 1985 the *Encyclopædia Britannica* for example offered a *Propædia* volume devoted to explicating the connections between, and the hierarchical subdivisions within, the disciplines. At the other end of the chronological spectrum, there is good evidence that some medieval readers (especially in scholastic circles) sought to consult rather than to memorize, and used elaborate systems of reference to retrieve items of interest. Perhaps some of the shifts which Cevolini describes are not outright innovations in the early modern period, but rather due to the spread, among progressively broader circles of readers, of practices which were used only by a few in the middle ages.

Cevolini has done much excellent work in studying the many manuals on excerpting which were published, often in multiple editions, especially in German lands between 1600 and 1800. He has mastered many hard-to-find Latin texts and has read widely in the relevant secondary literature. In chapter 8 he discusses especially well what he calls the school of Hamburg formed around the influence of Hamburg professor Joachim Jungius (1587–1657), whose students included Vincent Placcius. Cevolini notes the repetitions as well as the innovations in these manuals, such as Drexel's advice to note bibliographical references without copying out passages for books that remained ready at hand (1638) or Weitenauer's use of numbering as a system of reference alongside alphabetization (1775). Cevolini ends by noting the continuities between early modern precepts and the excerpting which Niklas Luhmann described as part of his own method of working, but he does not give much attention to conceptions of excerpting during the intervening period of nearly two centuries. In the relatively short compass of his analysis Cevolini also does not consider the evidence of actual excerpting practices available in surviving annotations and manuscripts.

The translations into Italian provided in the extensive appendix constitute the first modern vernacular versions of these works. Translated from the Latin are passages from Sacchini and Drexel, and all of Placcius's *De arte excerptendi* (1689) with the exception of Placcius's autobiographical letter appended to the book; from the French, Locke's "Méthode nouvelle de dresser des Recueils"; and from the German excerpts from Moser's *Vortheile für Canzley-Verwandte und Gelehrte* and Luhmann's article mentioned above. The translations are preceded by a valuable glossary of many specialist terms in Latin and German used in these texts and often not found in conventional dictionaries.

This book makes a powerful contribution to the study of excerpting, a topic which fully deserves the increasing attention it has garnered in recent years and which

played a crucial role, Cevolini argues forcefully, in the changing conceptions and practices of knowledge in early modern Europe. That the changes may have been more complex and less linear than Cevolini argues does not make these changes nor Cevolini's assessment of them any less significant.

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