HOUSING MEMORY IN THE LATE MEDIEVAL LITERARY TRADITION: CHAUCER'S *HOUSE OF FAME*

Abstract

Literary renderings both in written and oral forms would be regarded during the Middle Ages as enactments of an individual moral and intellectual evolution linked to the effects of memory on the human soul. Augustine's insightful depictions of the works of memory insisted on the visual quality of such a mental process, thus linking it to the writing and reading activities. When reviewing the imagery regarding this field, the figure of memory appears related to specific locations or habitats for images and words. Of particular interest is the coincidence of such metaphors to those attributed to the figure of Fame in classical literature, developed by Chaucer as he also explored the role of memory in the rise of a conscious individual writing positioning. This paper proposes to analyze Chaucer's "The House of Fame" in the light of Augustine's rendition of memory. Chaucer used fame as the embodiment of the preservation of public name in memory, regarding its locations as repositories of the legendary past in late medieval collective memory. The paper presents Chaucer's house of Fame as the place from which he starts a dialogue with past literature and history and with himself and the reader as recipients of that common legacy. **Keywords**: Chaucer, *The House of Fame*, Oral and written medieval literature, Memory, Saint Augustine.

Resumen

Durante la Edad Media las composiciones literarias tanto en su forma escrita como oral se consideraban representaciones de la moral individual tanto como de una evolución intelectual, e iban ligadas a los efectos de la memoria en el alma humana. Las acertadas representaciones que San Agustín propuso para las obras de la memoria insisten en las cualidades visuales de esos procesos mentales, de modo que las actividades de la escritura y de la lectura quedan unidas. Cuando revisamos las imágenes y metáforas que encontramos en este campo, la figura de la memoria aparece de forma relacionada con lugares específicos o con ambientes propios de imágenes y palabras. Resultan de particular interés las coincidencias de esas metáforas en relación con las que se atribuyen a la figura de la Fama en la literatura clásica según nos la presenta Chaucer. También Chaucer exploró el papel de la memoria en el desarrollo de la posición de la conciencia individual de la escritura. Este trabajo se propone analizar *La casa de la Fama* de Chaucer a la luz de la representación de la memoria que hace San Agustín. Chaucer utilizó la Fama como personificación de la memoria del nombre y la personalidad pública en relación con sus funciones de archivo del pasado legendario en la memoria colectiva del periodo bajomedieval. Este trabajo presenta la casa de la Fama de Chaucer como aquel lugar en el que comienza el diálogo entre la literatura y la historia del pasado con el autor y con el lector considerándolos como herederos de esa herencia común. **Palabras clave**: Chaucer, *La casa de la Fama*, Literatura medieval oral y escrita, Memoria, San Agustín.

In *Listening for the Text*, Brian Stock propounds the existence of a relationship of interdependence between oral and written traditions as one of the features of medieval culture. As legatees of

the Biblical and the Classical heritage, medieval authors acknowledged the preeminence of the divine utterance as well as the undeniable worth of the written literature they had received. Out of these legacies,[1] a symbiotic process started to arise between the oral and the visual systems of communication, so that "There was no orality without an implied textuality: there was no literacy without the primal force of the spoken word. Much of the subsequent dynamism of literature and society, in the sacred as well as in the secular sphere, arose from the continual reworking of this arrangement" (1990: 4).

One of the authors that best embodies the rise of such a symbiotic process is Augustine, whose own spiritual advancement was presented in his *Confessions*. The work presents the autobiographical rendition from the point of view of one who has been revealed the ultimate truth of the Bible and starts a vivid dialogue with himself and the divinity by recollecting his early years as imminently bound to the ensuing Christian vocation. By constantly resorting to his past as he talks in the present to the divinity, he evinces the outstanding role of memory in enabling the rise of an individual's personal continuity and thus of self-knowledge. Having devoted his youth to the study and teaching of rhetoric[2], Augustine certainly understood the significance of memory within the oratorical scheme. Therefore, he was able to draw on some practical mnemonic issues when adapting some of the Platonic tenets pertaining memory to Christian requirements. Well acquainted with the classical mnemonic tradition that had started in the pre-Socratic age, he delved on the metaphor of memory as a house, palace or cave the space of which is distributed and inhabited by diverse sets of memory bits:

[1] In reference to this huge legacy, C. S. Lewis (1964: 10) points out one of the medieval intellectual qualities which has traditionally been underrated: "At his most characteristic, medieval man was not a dreamer not a wanderer. He was an organizer, a codifier, a builder of systems. He wanted 'a place for everything and everything in the right place'. Distinction, definition, tabulation were his delight. Though full of turbulent activities, he was equally full of the impulse to formalize them".

[2] His teaching activity starts in 375 at Tagaste, holding his own school in Carthage from the following year to 383, when he travels to Rome to do the same, a work he will continue further when moving to Milan in 384.

> Transibo ergo et istam naturae meae, gradibus ascendens ad eum, qui fecit me, et venio in campos et lata praetoria memoriae, ubi sunt thesauri innumerabilium imaginum de cuiuscemodi rebus sensis invectarum. Ibi reconditum est, quidquid etiam cogitamus, vel augendo vel minuendo vel utcumque variando ea quae sensus attigerit, et si quid aliud conmendatum et repositum est, quod nondum absorbuit et sepelivit oblivio. Ibi quando sum, posco, ut proferatur quidquid volo, et quaedam statim prodeunt, quaedam requiruntur diutius et tanquam de abstrusioribus quibusquam receptaculis eruuntur, quedam catervatim se proruunt et, dum aliud petitur et quaeritur, prosiliunt in medium quasi dicentia: "ne forte nos sumus"? Et abigo ea manu cordis a facie recordationis meae, donec enubiletur quod volo atque in conspectum prodeat ex abditis. Alia faciliter atque perturbata serie sicut poscuntur suggeruntur et cedunt praecedentia consequentibus et cedendo conduntur, iterum cum voluero processura. Quod totum fit, cum aliquid narro memoriter.
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> *I come to the fields and spacious palaces of memory, where are the treasures of innumerable images, brought into it from things of all sorts perceived by the senses. There is stored up, whatever besides we think, either by enlarging or diminishing, or any other way varying those things which the sense hath come to; and whatever else hath been committed and laid up, which forgetfulness hath not yet swallowed up and buried. When I enter there, I require instantly what I will to be brought forth, and something instantly comes; others must be longer sought after, which are fetched, as it were out of some inner receptacle; others rush out in troops, and while one thing is desired and required, they start forth, as who should say, 'Is it perchance I?' These I drive away and with the hand of my heart from the face of my remembrance; until what I wish for be unveiled, and appear in sight, out of its secret place; until what I wish for be unveiled, and appear in sight, out of its secret place. Other things come up readily, in unbroken order, as they are called for; those in front making way for the following; and as they make way, they are hidden from sight, ready to come when I will. All which takes place when I recite a thing by heart.* (Bk X, ch. 8, 12, pp. 217–218)[3]

In this passage, the visual quality of memory as glossed by Yates's seminal work (1966) leans on the personified figures of vivified past events we have just seen dwelling in the rooms of this palace, and seems to respond to Aristotle's claim that any mental activity is produced by means of images. In accordance with such dictum, the most commonplace metaphors dealing with memory in ancient times emphasized the motive of the

[3] Translation by Frances Yates, p. 60.

storage, or that of the stamping of an image into some kind of soft matter.[4] According to Mary Carruthers: "This assumption concerning the material, and therefore spatial, nature of memory images also helps to account for why the ancients persistently thought of *memoria* as a kind of eye-dependent reading, a visual process" (1990: 27).

Notwithstanding the prevalence of the visual, Augustine however, also included in his program the neo-platonic discrimination between temporal things that could be reproduced thanks to images and intemporal or eternal ones, which he linked not only to the visual realm, but to the oral one as well, maybe as the echo of Plato's heuristic method, based on the dialogue. This oral tradition Augustine somehow restores in his constant addresses to God when referring to the process through which he searched further into his memory to find out the ultimate divine nature within himself.[5]

Drawing on these parallel ancient traditions and on the capital place of the mnemonic activity in late Roman times, Augustine could eventually present memory as one of the three qualities of the soul. His contribution to Western thought is equally based on his articulation of a particular sense of time, in which memory stands as the matrix of all human temporal

[4] Frances Yates (1966: 22) presents the artificial craft of memory exercised in classical times as parallel to the learning of the alphabet, through which the metaphor of the wax tablets turns even more meaningful: "The art of memory is like an inner writing. Those who know the letters of the alphabet can write down what is dictated to them and read out what they have written. Likewise those who have learned mnemonics can set in places what they have heard and deliver it from memory. 'For the places are very much like wax, tablets or papyrus, the images like the letters, the arrangement and disposition of the images like the scripts, and the delivery is like the reading'".

[5] Janet Coleman states (1992: 105): "Thanks to this eternal truth as form, we have in us a true knowledge of things engendered like the word, in an interior diction. (...) Augustine affirms that there is nothing that we do voluntarily which we have not previously said in our hearts". It is precisely this transcendental tendency in Augustine's theory of memory that has made authors like Luis Merino (2000: 361) defend his departure from mere rhetorical schemes in order to delve into deeper meanings. Thus, although the location imagery used by Augustine may be taken from the rhetorical mnemonic tradition, its target is placed farther: "El pasmo y el temor que Agustín siente ante la inmensidad de la memoria demuestra que el intelecto es incapaz de abarcarla. Por tanto, la topografía de la memoria de la que Agustín habla en clave metafórica debe entenderse en un sentido propiamente filosófico, incluso religioso, y no retórico".

perception.[6] Since memory makes present that which is no longer seen in actuality, it becomes the matrix within which humans perceive present and future as well. According to Carruthers, "this amounts to saying that present and future are mediated by this memory of the past" (1990: 193). Cultural historian Pierre Nora (2004: 25) argues that Western society is no longer based on memory as a collective activity, this being one of the causes for the obsession with history as a means of recollecting those lost traces. In the late ancient world and the Middle Ages, instead, the key role assigned to memory guaranteed the survival of the past. But if the past could modify the sense of the present, the present was conversely engrained in the recollection of the past, and thus was persistently used to reconstruct it. This could be easily evidenced by the role of the rhetorician and poet, who spoke not about the real historical events but about the probable more universal accounts from which general lessons could be drawn according to present perceptions.[7] To Coleman (1992: 37), the orator or poet "unites a community of individual rememberers by integrating them into the collectively accepted plausible fictions of their common past." This duty had already been acknowledged by authors

[6] According to Harald Kleinschmidt's interpretation of *Confessiones* cap. XI, 14–15 (2000: 17), "If time exists, it is not present, because it has no duration; but if it has a duration, then it is either past or future, and the[n], we cannot say that time is, because the past is no longer, and the future is not yet. But, nevertheless, time exists. (...) The most general remark about St Augustine's experience of time is that he perceived it as a remote process, far beyond the practical command and intellectual grasp of human beings, perplexingly created by the divinity, with an absolute dominance over the human world, moving on autonomously from the past into the future and preventing human beings from penetrating its inner nature. (...) the human experience of time was indirect, transmitted through instruments of the measurement of time, on the one side, and, on the other, through the human mind through which knowledge of the past could be recreated by the use of words."

[7] Matthew Innes (2000: 3) equally reminds of the difficult approach of nineteenth-century historians to early medieval historical texts which had not been conceived out of the moral exegetical frame of poetry: "In a study of four of the canonical texts in early medieval history, Goffart argued that Jordanes' *Gothic History*, Gregory of Tours' *Histories*, Bede's *Ecclesiastica History of the English People* and Paul the Deacon's *History of the Lombards*, needed to be read as literary arguments, whose authors drew upon classical historiographical and rhetorical traditions inherited wholesale in representing the past of their societies to make a point about the present"

like Cicero, who claimed poets had "to maintain the life of the collective memory through recalling the exemplary nature of the past (Coleman 1992: 59)[8]. Augustine received the Ciceronian oratorical schemes as well as the respect for the concept of *auctoritas* through which the survival of the past was to be enacted.

Resting on the Augustinian foundation, the Middle Ages was therefore an intense memorial culture, so that, according to Evans (2003: 92), by the fourteenth century:

> [...] memory was by and large omnipresent, integrated, ritualistic, and tinged with the sacred: not a property of the individual, but a means of putting the individual and the community in a continuous relation with the past (...) All levels of society were concerned with the transmission of collective values through 'remembrance', whether through the learned textual traditions of *auctoritas* or through everyday domestic objects".

It is the contention of this paper that the *The House of Fame* explores the links between present and past, the representation of what is being individually recollected out of communal contents of social nature which the author shares and makes present through the local and temporal imaginative device of the journey as symbolic of the memorial process.

To start with, the poem could be interpreted as one of those items of family memory; just as today's siblings may gather together around a picture album to comment on the family photographs and so reconstruct, alter or reinforce their common memories and identities (Middleton & Edwards 1992: 12), the poem is a picture in which legendary fathers and sons might be recognized: the key concept being that of fame, the narrator presents his journey to the palace of this allegorical figure, where he will be able to meet many of the famous *auctores* of the ancient and medieval literary tradition in a "vindication of poetry"(Bennett 1986: xi). But on the other hand, it is also a reenactment of a poetic scheme that enabled the imaginary contact between the past and the present, namely the dream-vision frame, which poets had followed relentlessly since ancient times. Thus, in reproducing a kind of dream experience

[8] "This recollection was unproblematic; its capacity to convince depended not on an investigation of evidence (...) but on the rhetorical plausibility of present arguments whose basis lay in unreflective common opinion." (Coleman 1992: 59).

that Petrarch, Boccaccio, Machaut, Dante, Boethius or Cicero had had, Chaucer was not only offering a picture of ancient figures, but taking a picture of himself among his equals and adding his own point of view to the portrait. However, his reconstruction of the past literary tradition, although responding to this conventional frame, performs a divergent and particular operation: Chaucer will underline the alternation of visual and aural transmission in order to question the resilience of fame as a means of defining the reliable remembrance of the past in individual and collective memory.

The structure of the poem and its unfinished state have puzzled readers and critics who wonder whether Chaucer might be parodying previous poets and thus trying to release himself from the chain of *auctores* that had set the path for him either in Latin or in the vernacular languages. Whatever appears in this dream might recall the traditional elements laid out as part of the ritualistic poetic setting of the dream vision: it is on the air or ethereal regions that the poet approaches higher truths, led by the hand of a reputed guide, Cicero and Aeneas being the most outstanding ones. Dante's influence over *The House of Fame* having been confirmed, its echo resounds not only in the figure of the eagle or in the dreamer's invocation to Apollo, but particularly in the reference to Troy, that immediately evokes the key guiding figure of Virgil in Dante's *Comedy*.[9] However, I think that Augustine's *Confessions* are equally decisive in the treatment of the Dido-Aeneas episode (*HF* 221–382). Chaucer's treatment of the legend is quite revealing of the degree of intricacy between the written and other visual languages in late medieval culture. As the poet wakes up within his dream, he finds himself in the temple of glass where he sees the portrait of the ruling goddess, Venus. In such depiction, he refers to colors and shapes; what next attracts his attention, as he says, is the following:

[9] On the one hand, Piero Boitani (1984: 82) refers specifically to the architectural device of the castle of Limbo in Dante's work as an undeniable source of inspiration for Chaucer's castle of Fame: "[...] Aeneas and the heroes of the Troy legend that Dante places in his Limbo, and the matter of Thebes which is represented there by Statius' heroines do figure in Fame's hall." (1984: 83). On the other hand, authors like St John (2000: 82), still accepting such influence, stress the diverse standpoints from which both poets depart, since "In Chaucer's poem, however, the limitations of the individual's perspective are transcended not spiritually but rationally".

But as I romed up and doun,
I fond that on a wall ther was
Thus written on a table of bras:
"I wol now synge, yif I kan,
The armes and also the man
That first cam, thurgh his destine,
Fugityf of Troy contree,
In Ytalye, with ful moche pyne
Unto the strondes of Lavyne"

But as I wandered up and down / I found that on a wall there was / Upon a tablet made of brass / Inscribed the following: "If I can, / I now shall sing arms and the man. / The destined knight of mighty fame / Who fugitive from Troy first came / Much suffering to Italian land, / And trod Lavinium's river-strand" (*HF* 140–48)

These lines reproduce the beginning of *The Aeneid*, which the dreamer seems to be presently reading;[10] the narrator starts referring to verbs that reinforce the sense of sight, so much so that he seems to have stopped reading and devotes his eyes to watching figurative depictions of the legendary characters, thus keeping to the metaphor of memory as a surface on which images are being carved or drawn. The location, a temple, is also evocative of Augustine's depictions of the palaces of memory where the passages known by heart wait on us as we search for them. The dreamer finds it easy to move from the glass walls devoted to goddess Venus to the space dedicated to Aeneas, her son. Once there, the figurative quality enables the narrator to supersede the Virgilian account and to present the narration from his own point of view, since he no longer seems to be reading but rather reproducing the famous Troy legend in his imagination out of the painted shapes he finds on the walls, no longer on the brass tablet. Thus, thanks to this work of recollection of the Trojan past, he

[10] Besides, it reenacts the fragment in Bk I of *The Aeneid* in which, when entering the temple of Juno in Libya, Aeneas see the depiction of the war of Troy on the walls. Let's remember that there existed the mythographic tradition of the "poetic pictures" to refer to the poetic arts in rhetorical uses. When dealing with the concept of locational memory, Carruthers (1993: 887) reminds that Chaucer had already used the wall-painting in the form of a written book which glossed the *Romance de la Rose* in "The Book of the Duchess", this device of stained-glass windows or wall-paintings being traditionally recognized as demanding meditational recollection.

will be slowly varying the intensity and opinions on some passages, like that dedicated to queen Dido:

> Ther saugh I such tempest aryse
> that every herte might agryse
> To see hyt peynted on the wal
> (...) Ther saugh I Joves Venus kysse,
> And graunted of the tespest lysse.
> Ther saugh I how the tempest stente,
> And how with alle pyne he wente,
> (...) Ther sawgh I grave how Eneas
> Tolde Dido every caas
> That hym was tyd upon the see.
> And after grave was how shee
> Made of hym shortly at oo word
> Hyr lyf, hir love, hir lust, hir lord,
> And dide hym al the reverence.

> *I saw there such a tempest wake / That every heart would shudder and shake / To see it painted on the wall. / (…) I saw Jove kiss her; then he swore / To Venus he would still the uproar. / I watched the tempest come to rest / And saw Aeneas, much distressed"* (*HF* 209–11 & 219–22). *I saw Aeneas painted there, / Telling Dido all the care / And woes he suffered while at sea. / And then was painted there how she / Created him with just one word / Her life, her love, her joy, her lord. / And did him every reverence.* (*HF* 253–59)

From this moment onwards, the dreamer seems to be gazing at (or reading) a different book, since he cannot help producing his own continuation of the episode according now, not to Aeneas' interests, but to a female point of view which rather is identified with that of queen Dido, as she realizes that Aeneas has abandoned her and laments her fate:

> "O wel-awey that I was born!
> For thorgh yow is my name lorn,
> And alle myn actes red and songe
> Over al thys lond, on every tonge.
> O wikke Fame!—for ther nys
> Nothing so swift, lo, as she is!
> O, soth ys, every thing ys wyst,
> Though hit be kevered with the myst.
> Eke, though I myghte duren ever,
> That I have don rekever I never,

That I ne shal be syd, allas,
Yshamed be thourgh Eneas,

> *"Ah woe the day that I was born! / Through you my name is lost and gone, / And all my acts are read and sung / Throughout the land by every tongue. / O wicked Fame! There cannot be / A thing that moves as swift as she! / Yes, all is known and nothing missed, / Though it be covered with a mist. / Indeed, though I might live for ever, / Undo what I have done I never / Shall be able to. My name / Through Aeneas is brought to shame".* (*HF* 345–56)

These lines reveal that Chaucer, though acknowledging the Virgilian masterpiece and Dante's reverential portrait of his guide, does not agree with the triumphant epic tone tradition had endowed it with. Instead of reproducing Virgil's song of glory, he presents fame not linked to the heroic male character but to Dido's tragedy, according to her portrait in Ovid's seventh letter of *Epistolae Heroidum* (*Heroides 7*). The betrayed queen kills herself once she understands she has lost her good name as a consequence of the male habit of telling about love conquests.

Virgil's work had been specifically linked to the training of memory. No wonder Augustine in *De anima* referred to his school friend Simplicius and his remarkable ability to handle this text and recite it even backwards:

> [...] cum interrogatus esset a nobis, quos uersus Vergilius in omnibus libris supra ultimos dixerit, continuo celeriter memoriterque respondit. Queaesiuimus etiam superiores ut diceret: dixit. Et credidimus eum posse retrorsus recitare Vergilium; de quocumque loco uoluimus, petiuimus ut facere: fecit.

> [...] *when he might be asked by us for all the next-to-last verses in each book of Virgil, responded in order quickly and from memory. If we then asked him to recite the verse before each of those, he did. And we believed that he could recite Virgil backwards. If we desired a commonplace concerning any topic, we asked him to make one and he did.* (*De Natura et Origine Animae Libri quattuor*, IV, vii, 9, 1987: 815–816)[11]

The capacity to master memory was best proved by this backward utterance of the passages, which Cicero had also attributed to fellow orators or famous characters in the art of memory. Beryl Rowland finds Chaucer's possible source for his topic in bishop Brawardine's treatise on

[11] Translation by Mary Carruthers, 1990, p. 19).

artificial memory,[12] but maybe Augustine's references were as well taken into account. Together with this capacity to recite poems in the reverse order, a very different way to substantiate the mark of a literary fragment on the listeners was their liability to be moved by it. It is quite revealing that in the *Confessions* Augustine complains about the fact that, instead of having read the Bible in his student years, he had employed his wits in learning the Latin alphabet and grammar precisely through the reading of the *Aeneid*.

> [...] nam utique meliores, quia certiores, erant primae illae litterae, quibus fiebat in me et factum est et habeo illud, ut et legam, si quid scriptum invenio, et scribam ipse, si quid volo, quam illae, quibus tenere cogebar Aeneae nescio cuis errores oblitus errorum meorum et plorare Didonem mortuam, quia se occidit ab amore, cum interea me ipsum in his a te morientem, deus, vita mea, siccis oculis ferrem miserrimus.
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> [...] *These letters (the Greek ones) were much more useful than the following ones (Latin). The former gave me the power, which I still hold, to read what is written and to write what I want. However, through the latter ones they made me learn by heart the adventures of an Aeneas, whom I did not know, while forgetting my own mistakes. I also learnt how to lament the death of Dido, who killed herself out of love, while I, amid these things, died far from you, my God and life, not shedding a single tear*. (Bk I, ch. 13)[13]

[12] "Metrodorus of Scepsis was reputed to have recorded on the images of the zodiac all that he wished to remember. Brawardine may be alluding to a similar system when he says that if one wants to be reminded of more things, he should put 'images in the places following in the same way'. He adds, 'when this is done, he who is recalling can recite those things in the order which he wishes, that is to say directly or backward'" (1975: 44–5). For Chaucer's use of artificial memory, see also E. Buckmaster (1986).

[13] My translation. Robertsonian echoes can be found in Koonce's (1966: 112) analogical reading of the temple of glass passage in comparison to Dante's "Inferno", based on the tropological interpretation through which Dido is perceived as the symbol of libidinous love. Marilynn Desmond's chapter on Dido as libido starts by referring to Augustine's quotation as a seminal reference to the danger that Dido's image symbolically posed as identified with the desire that arouse out of memory (1994: 76):"He notes that his acquisition of literacy ostensibly provided him with the autonomy to read and write what he wished, but his initial experiences of reading the *Aeneid* and committing it to memory threatened his autonomy as a subject and undermined his will".

In the *Confessions*, Aeneas' abandonment of Dido and her death are made parallel to young Augustine's abandonment and forgetfulness of God. The misdirected tears of the forlorn woman and those of the young grammar pupil may bring fatal consequences: physical and spiritual death respectively. But whereas young Augustine had finally redirected his quest towards inner memory in search of God, Chaucer's persona does not forget Dido, and instead warns women to beware of men who boast about their conquests. Chaucer turns therefore the whole passage into a strong reminder of the need to remember what has been read. He performs the role of the orator or poet, who tries to transform stories into universal examples for readers to keep in their heart and meditate on.

This endeavor to emphasize a pragmatic approach to memory is but the first step of a careful program of decomposition of the notion of fame. My theory is that the whole structure of the poem rests primarily on the Dido-Aeneas episode, which epitomizes the values of memory and Chaucer's exercise of backward recitation. Its disposition in diverse spaces, its written or engraved form, the sacred quality of the crystal architecture... If considered this way, the Carthaginian episode should correspond chronologically, not to the first, but to the last step in the initiation journey, the encounter with inner memory after having properly read and swallowed the ancient authors. But then, what about the palace of Fame and the house of Rumour? What is their role in his passage to memory? These also follow the storage space metaphor, but they are not made for housing memory but that which precedes it, rumour being chronologically prior to fame and fame to memory. These two former stages, anterior to the stamping of memories in our mental spaces are best conveyed by the oral communal habit. The leading character here, the eagle, will announce the sound quality of these second and third parts of the poem. As it arises seizing the poet in its talons, the bird teaches him about the nature of sound, on which fame rests.[14] When the poet gets into the palace, again the sound of the pomp surrounding Fame will be outstanding: among the crowd of musicians, poets, the trumpets Great

[14] "Sound is only air that is broken. / And every single word that is spoken, / Aloud or secret, foul or fair, / Is in its essence only air" (*HF* 765–68) "Each air stirs up another one / Increasingly: and once begun / Then voice or noise or word or sound / With amplified effect is bound / To travel to the House of Fame." (817–821)

Renown and Evil Fame and all kinds of supplicants for fame, very few will be guaranteed the survival of their name. Some of these sounds have arrived embodied in the shapes of the characters in their stories, dressed in the colors of books, or become simply the authors' human shapes, a process the eagle had warned the poet about:

> But understond now right wel this:
> Whan any speche ycomen ys
> Up to the paleys, anon-ryght
> Hyt wexeth lyk the same wight
> Which that the word in eerthe spak,
> Be hyt clothed red or blak;
> And hath so verray hys lyknesse
> That spak the word, that thou wilt gesse
> That it the same body be,
> Man or woman, he or she.
>
> *But grasp this further: when a speech / Arrives within that house's reach, / Then straight away it starts to take / The form its speaker used to make / On earth below when it was said, / Whether clothed in black or red; / And has a likeness so exact / To the speaker that you'd swear in fact / It must the self-same body be, / Man or woman, he or she*. (*HF* 1073–1082)

The dreamer immediately recognizes some of the figures, but these are not those of the great heroes, but of the poets who sang them; thus, he privileges the role of poets over those of historical or legendary characters.[15] Finally, as he feels seduced by the sound of the next house, that of Rumour, the oral quality exceeds the visual element. Chaucer presents thus the very first stage in the rise of collective imagination and memory: the notion of gossip. But let's remember that gossip had already appeared in the poem precisely as the reason for Dido's disgrace, which was carved in the mind's memorized version of the temple of glass. If reciting in the reverse order was known to be an ability of proficient students in the art of memory, Chaucer is here implying his own backward journey, since Dido and Aeneas' story had first started in the house of Rumour, had later gone through the work of poets at the house of Fame and finally landed

[15] "And by him stood—no lie I speak / High on a column of iron true, / Great Homer, with him Dares too, / The Phrygian, Dictys of Crete / In front, and Lollius, complete / With Guido delle Colonne and / Geoffrey of Monmouth, understand? / For each of these, God grant me joy / Busily penned the fame of Troy. / So mighty was that city's fame, / To write of it was not a game." (*HF* 1464–1474).

as memorized engraved poems in the temple of glass, precisely where the dream starts.

The stories told at the house of Rumour spring from anonymous mouths and try to get into the house of Fame. The poet seems happier witnessing the spontaneous and varying whirl of words moving through this labyrinth, which does not resemble the organized realms of memory. Here movement and sound reign completely[16]. The collective quality of rumour will undergo an individual authorial turn that lady Fame's decisions will seal up;[17] but even so, we are certainly very far from Augustine's conception of memory as a quality of the soul through which mankind's divine origin might be traced. In Chaucer's backward dream, the origin of memory is in the last space he has access to, the house of Rumour, but this cradle of future memories stands not for God's primeval word but for the communal constant need to share and reproduce words. Chaucer's claim is for an individual perception of the relative quality of fame when attributed to the work of past authors, and therefore, to the past as a whole.[18] He acknowledges the role of poets as endowers of fame, but defends as well a present communal disposition or affection for some works that might diverge from traditional attitudes so far thought immutable.

[16] The multiplying and distorting effect of repeated oral accounts is best perceived by the image of the swelling of news which in their competition to come out of the labyrinth: "Each time he told it to a man / His news was more and stranger than / It was before. Thus north and south / Went all the news from mouth to mouth, / Each time increasing more and more," (*HF* 2073–2077) "I saw two rising to the air, / A falsehood and a serious truth / By chance at one time coming both / And striving for a window space. / Colliding in that narrow place," (2089–2092) "Thus saw I false and true confounded, / Flying up in each report. / So out of holes there squeezed and fought / Each bit of news, and went to Fame," (*HF* 2108–2111).

[17] Or, as Minnis, Scattergood & Smith would put it (1995: 213): "The movement from Rumour to Fame is the process in which experience becomes tradition—and contamination, it would seem, is an unavoidable part of the process".

[18] Norman Klassen (1995: 190) points out to this particular disposition in the Chaucerian poem: "Unlike Augustine, Chaucer does not offer the same evaluation of reading poetry. Whereas for the Church father such reading is affective and contrasts with the certainty of acquiring basic skills or essential spiritual knowledge, for Chaucer it provokes positive questions of his relationship as poet to *auctoritas*. He is conscious of the role of the individual in negotiating the past, hearsay, truth. His is a humanistic response, where knowledge in whatever form has become interesting *per se*.

The dreamer's preference for Ovid's[19] (instead of Virgil's) approach to the figure of Aeneas[20] as a traitor and defamer, as well as his relish in finding present day's manifold hybrid news and stories at the house of Rumour, describe Chaucer's skepticism about the static nature of literary tradition[21] and of the past.[22] But if he acknowledges the creative role of gossip in the formation and deformation of oral traditions, he equally highlights through this peculiar journey with Dido & Aeneas the importance of individual reading in the molding of memory and experience, a legacy he might have received from Augustine.

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[19] According to Minnis, Scattergood and Smith (1995: 237): "Certainly, in book I of the *House of Fame*, as in the narratives of the *Legend*, Chaucer sided with Ovid, and that inevitably meant the subversion of the authority of Virgil. That is hardly surprising, since Ovid had set himself up as a writer who was diametrically opposed to Virgil; his retelling of the *Aeneid* in *Heroides* vii constitutes a refusal to ally himself with his elder contemporary's celebration of military glory and the distinguished lineage of the Emperor Augustus, ruler of the New Troy.

[20] As Silvia Federico (2003: 148) states: "[...]Aeneas creates Chaucer in his image: the medieval poet becomes, after his death, the founder of an empire (of letters). He is the "father of English poetry" just as Aeneas is the father of Europe. But both foundations are based in treason, or in heroic defections from authoritative precedent, and both prompt disavowals and revisions in their wake."

[21] *Ibid*., p. 236: "In *The House of Fame*, by contrast, Chaucer seems to be conveying a sense of the lack of durability of literary fame-and indeed of all fame (as book iii intimates), since fame rests on evidence which is invariably literary, the testimony of 'olde bookes'. Neither is there any belief in the durability of empire and civic fame, no vision of the *translation imperii* to a 'New Troy', whether it be Rome or London, to correspond to Dante's faith in the divine origin and preservation of his continuing city. In view of such powerlessness, the *House of Fame* can be said to record Chaucer's crisis of authority."

[22] *Ibid*., p. 146: "'History' is thus created through a loss of control that more broadly characterizes the writing process. As Chaucer himself lamented on many occasions, once a text is 'published' and sent out to the future, anything might happen to it. This loss of control is simultaneous with the process of trying to fix, to capture, to solidify an event as history. *Fama* and history are bedfellows, and the authority of history is as dangerous as the supposed impediments to it".

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