

Chaucer and the Materiality of Memory

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In a paper published in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* in 2001, Ruth Evans offered a vivid representation of Chaucer sitting at his desk in his house over Aldgate and writing *The House of Fame* using a computer on which would be safely stored all his references, texts, and manuscripts. The use of an immaterial memory to feed his writing is particularly helpful to understand a poem such as *The House of Fame* because it is obsessed by “medieval technologies of memory and archiving”. Given the theme of this year’s congress, I would like to focus on Chaucer’s treatment of the materiality of memory in that poem and the contrast with a purely oral and memorial transmission. Indeed, the poet shows here that our memory is very much shaped and defined by the objects carrying it.

Written shortly after Chaucer’s journeys in Italy in 1373 and 1378, *The House of Fame* represents a major landmark in the history of English literature. *Fame* is a dream vision narrated in the first person by Chaucer’s persona, Geoffrey, a man whose knowledge of love is rather bookish. At the beginning of the poem, we are thus told that he fell asleep in his bed and woke up in the Temple of Venus, from which he was afterwards taken by an eagle that led him to the House of Fame as a compensation for his devotion to Love.

But as soon as Geoffrey wakes up, we understand that Chaucer is dealing with something new. Unlike what is usually expected of such a beginning, the poet does not use the dream vision in order to transport his dreamer into an allegory of love, but a world that will be fundamentally memorial. Chaucer was indeed forced to remember the stories and quotes used in his poem and did not necessarily have access to physical documents to check them. And yet, he was living in an age that saw the rise of new systems of information storage, display and retrieval such as library catalogues, encyclopedias, rubrics, marginal comments to mark a particular item in a document, running titles, etc.¹ There was thus a need for a concrete materialization of memory to prevent the loss or distortion of information produced by oral transmission. And what Chaucer illustrates in *Fame* is both the dangers of an unmaterial memory and the ephemeral quality of a physical storage of information.

The poem accordingly takes place almost entirely in the realm of literature. One of the first examples of Chaucer’s memorial concerns can be found in Book I, when Geoffrey finds

extracts and illustrations from the *Aeneid* in the Temple of Venus. His narrator discovers the first words of the *Aeneid* carved on a brass tablet (I. l. 143-148). However, his description seems to indicate that he is contemplating wall paintings or stone carvings. But if that were true, how could Geoffrey see dialogues? He tells us, after all, how he saw Venus comforting Aeneas, telling him to go to Carthage (I. l. 224-238), and even refuses to spend too much time on Dido's encounter with Aeneas and "How they aqueynteden in fere" (I. l. 250). Chaucer thus willingly confuses our perception of these material forms of representation. For if images can be painted or carved, why not speech? As the poet himself tells us:

What shulde I speke more queynte,
Or peyne me my wordes peynte²
To speke of love? Hyt wol not be;
I kan not of that faculte.
(I. l. 245-248)

And in fact, this use of the *Aeneid* is "a graphic representation of the way that Virgil's epic is etched into cultural memory, but in a way that also freezes it and renders it lifeless."³ The table of brass on which Geoffrey notices the story evokes the cold writing on tombs: the fixed and permanent character of a material representation might be reassuring but it is also bound to disappear. Pierre Nora remarked that we institute memory places to preserve some sense of continuity with the past: "We archive everything because memory is [...] subject to the fluctuating process of forgetting as well as remembering."⁴ And that is precisely what Chaucer illustrates in *Fame*. To do so, he draws from Augustinian thought the main characteristics of visible speech and exploits its limitations. In *Johannis Evangelium Tractatus*, Saint Augustine states that the human mind does not react the same way when confronted with an image or a written text: the simple act of looking at a visual work of art suffices to understand its message, whereas a written text requires a specific ability that is not necessarily shared by all, namely reading (XXV, 2). Augustine also adds in his *Confessions* that when events from the past are told, we do not extract from our memory the facts as they truly occurred. On the contrary, the words we hear will produce images in our mind standing for these experiences (XI, 18). There is in other words a difference between events and their representation in the human mind.

The scenes imaged in the Temple of Venus become, in this respect, problematical, for, when Geoffrey starts looking at the tablet, he does not render Virgil's words as faithfully as we might expect. The words enter Geoffrey's mind and leave it transformed by his own voice. Thus, whereas Virgil writes "Arma virumque cano, Trojæ qui primus ab oris / Italiam, fato profugus, Laviniaque venit"⁵ (l. 1-2), Geoffrey says:

"I wol now synge, yif I kan,
The armes and also the man
That first cam, thurgh his destinee,
Fugityf of Troy contree,
In Itayle, with ful moche pyne
Unto the strondes of Lavyne."

(I. l. 143-148)

The translation itself is almost perfect. Yet the element "yif I kan" does not come from Virgil's text, but from Chaucer's usual *topos* of modesty. And it is only the first of a long series of changes that will increasingly diminish Virgil's own voice. When Geoffrey tells us the story of Dido and Aeneas, the legend has accordingly very little to do with the version he found in the *Aeneid*, since he transforms the main character into a self-obsessed villain whose only interest is glory. The queen of Carthage herself is, as a result, no longer the treacherous woman tradition had immortalized, but the victim of a man's dishonesty. After all, Dido's myth is nothing but a poetical reinvention of a historical character: her relationship with Aeneas and her supposed betrayal of her late husband are both parts of this rewriting. Whether the author of this revision is called Ovid (*Heroides*), Boccaccio (*De mulieribus claris*) or Chaucer (*The House of Fame*, *The Legend of Good Women*) does not change the fact that they all turned to Virgil's poetical re-imagination of this event. Virgil's strength lies in his having imposed his own vision as a historical account.⁶ Chaucer's approach to the myth is apparently quite similar. Yet, he refers for the first time to the fictitious dimension of Dido's encounter with the heir of Troy by enriching his story with details for which "Non other auctour alegge I"⁷ (I. l. 314). Even so, Chaucer does not simply blend his sources since he shows by juxtaposing them that they are quite often contradictory. In other words, he demonstrates that those recent additions to the myth are just as artificial as those included by his predecessors. Virgil, Ovid and the others had re-imagined the original story just as Geoffrey

has re-imagined the first lines of the *Aeneid*.⁸ As a consequence, the transmission of the story is inevitably altered by the passage through the mind of a new transmitter. It is never as pure and close to the original as the author intends it to be. And when Chaucer reproduces a text with his own words, he challenges the fictitious dimension of the story and the responsibility of the artist and of literature in general. This is something he manages to illustrate through his assimilation of the notion of visible speech.

When Geoffrey finally gets out of the Temple, he is blinded by the beauty of the surroundings, but feels nonetheless completely lost (I. v. 468-488) and starts praying Jesus to save him from “fantome and illusion” (I. l. 493). He is not particularly scared by his physical situation and was quite happy in the Temple, where he recognized every word and illustration. Deprived of the comfort of his literary world, however, he suddenly starts doubting his senses. Everything he has seen might just be, in the end, a trick of the mind without any foundations in the real world.⁹ And just as Geoffrey is pondering the implications of his situation, the eagle arrives and takes him to the House of Fame.

The eagle remains the most significant element ever borrowed by Chaucer from the *Commedia*: Dante and Geoffrey both witness the arrival of that eagle with gold feathers (*Fame*, V. l. 529-533; *Purg.* IX, l. 19-21) descending upon them as lightning (*Fame*, v. 534-540; *Purg.* v. 28-30), and refer to the myth of Ganymede (*Fame*, l. 588-591; *Purg.* l. 22-24). Nonetheless, Chaucer does not merely use the eagle as a way to advance his plot. On the contrary, he “borrows not words, but an image and the process by which it is formed”,¹⁰ and the eagle rapidly becomes in *Fame* the symbol of Dantean visible speech.

When Dante is transported from the fifth to the sixth sphere of Paradise, he notices saintly beings floating in the air like birds that rise from riverbanks and while the poet is seduced by the beauty of the place, he sees them “segnare agli occhi miei nostra favella”¹¹ (*Par.* XVIII, l. 72). As they sing, they start to form shapes that spell words that Dante recognizes as being the first sentence of the *Book of Wisdom*, “Diligite iustitiam [...] qui iudicatis terram”¹² (L. 91-93). At that moment, more beings are attracted to the M of the final word, which starts to take the shape of an eagle. This idea of speech taking visible form is not new in the *Commedia* and invariably implies, in such a theologically monumental work, the presence of a divine creator. Yet, this artistic beauty had already been announced at the beginning of the *Purgatorio*. Indeed, Dante discovers there a bordering bank of white marble and adorned by the divine creator with carvings so beautiful that “la natura li avrebbe scorno”¹³ (*Purg.* X, l. 33). These

carvings representing humility illustrate famous historical and Biblical scenes, but the expressivity of the images is so strong that they provoke synaesthesia: looking at the carvings, Dante thinks he can hear Archangel Gabriel speak, people sing, and smell the perfume of incense. It seems that the images come alive in front of Dante, a feeling reinforced by the poet's description of the scenes carved. They are not only "intagliato" and "effigiata" (carved and shown, l. 55, 67), which evokes the action of the artist working on the material, but also "imaginata" and "impressa" (imagined and imprinted, l. 41, 43). As a result, the "common metaphor of impressing further suggests the inward effect of the carvings on the mind of the beholder"¹⁴.

The eagle's metamorphosis and the disruption of senses establish a strong link between divine and human creation, and more concretely between physical and immaterial transmission. If the arrival of the eagle implies a return of the motif of visible speech in *Fame*, the very nature of the tidings Geoffrey is to hear remains, at this point, obscure.¹⁵ The eagle eventually explains that those tidings are sounds (II. l. 765), words uttered in our world, which reach the Houses of Fame and Rumor where they take the shapes of their speakers. The House of Rumor is thus described by the narrator as a whirling wicker cage where gossip is filtered. In that place, the living and the dead whisper rumors and tidings into each other's ears, deforming the news and stories as they are passed along from one spirit to another, to the point of being unrecognizable. Accordingly, if the rumors are free to come and go in the House, they seldom leave it without changing shape. Truths and lies are often entangled and have no other alternative than to mingle (III. l. 2102-2107). Stories and tidings, whether true or false, are consequently altered by their transmission and combined in the House of Rumor before spreading to the world with Fame's blessing. In presenting a particularly corrupt chain of transmission, Chaucer thus calls into question once again the distorting functions of memory by a use of visible speech that echoes his treatment of Dido's legend in Book I.¹⁶ But he also forces us to wonder if the story we are reading is as ambiguous as he seems to indicate.

Far from resolving this impasse, "[t]he journey of tidings through imagination and memory [...] seems rather to magnify its troubling suggestion that reading and writing result in nothing but 'fantome and illusion'".¹⁷ For if the tidings escaping from the House of Rumor are a combination of truth and lies, how, then, can we be sure that the famous stories told in our world are not themselves partly untruthful? This fallibility is further intensified by the fact

that most medieval poems were read aloud in public. In that context, if we are to believe Saint Augustine, the author loses control of his creation since his words, once uttered, are assimilated by the listeners only to take different shapes and meanings in their minds. Chaucer's use of visible speech in Fame's domain is thus defined by orality. Indeed, the notion of stories taking the physical shape of their speakers makes visible the idea that human beings cannot help but speak in their own voices, no matter what the universal truth they claim to utter is. It comes therefore as no surprise that Geoffrey should encounter figures related to the spoken word before entering the House of Fame. Not only does he see Orpheus, Orion and other legendary harpists playing music, along with musicians of lesser rank, but he also meets magicians, illusionists and soothsayers (III. l. 1201-1281). Besides, even though the inside of the temple is dedicated to written literature, Chaucer keeps reminding us that the two forms of expression are complementary. Geoffrey hears, for example, the poets who immortalized the Trojan War argue about the *Iliad*, with some spirits defending Homer, while Trojan supporters accuse him of having favoured the Greeks (III. l. 1477-1480). For one supporter in particular, Homer's version of the story is nothing but a fable. In other words, the story behind the myth is lost and the fragments that we possess are only rumors and tidings. It is the juxtaposition of points of view that allows Chaucer to emphasize that every story, once transmitted, is gradually altered to the point of becoming an unrecognizable association jumble of rumors and tidings.

Memorial and oral transmissions are in other words central but liable to change. The materialization of memory, on the other hand, is no better it seems. When Geoffrey finally arrives on the steep pick upon which is built the house of Fame, he notices that the House's foundations are made out of ice. Describing the frailty of those foundations, Geoffrey remarks that the builder has very little reasons to boast (III. l. 1128-1135). Worst of all, the ice, covered with the name of famous people is starting to melt, thus erasing the inscriptions that cover its surface. But the melting away of the names is not exactly arbitrary for it is linked with their being used within the traditions of *auctoritas*. *Fame* has been written at a decisive moment, when memory was increasingly being substituted by new archiving technologies that made those tidings material and, apparently eternal. The poem thus allows us to see Chaucer reflecting on this changing paradigm and how the methods of archiving will affect knowledge in the future. In many ways, the ice foundations of Fame echo Derrida's conception of the archive as an "accumulation and capitalization of memory on some substrate and in an exterior place"¹⁸. But for Chaucer, if memorial transmission provokes a transformation of tidings, their physical incarnation might provoke the destruction of memory if anything were

to happen to those archives. As Evans notes, “The fear that the passage registers is that current writers – Chaucer included – will not last as authorities. The poem records the loss and death of the writing self.”¹⁹

In the end, we can sum up Chaucer’s conception of material and immaterial memory with two metaphors. The house of Rumor is a wicker cage that cannot conserve everything that goes through it and that allows the transformations of tidings as they go out. That is human memory: from the moment we hear something, we store it, but it will evolve through time and invariably be transformed once transmitted again. That is basically what happens with Chaucer’s use of the *Aeneid*: he probably did not have a copy of the text and remembered what he read even though material copies of the text existed. Hence a constant evolution of tidings and stories orally transmitted. The block of ice, on the other hand, is the material archive. It is material but doomed. While memorial and oral transmissions keep tidings moving, changing – alive, basically – material storage protects tidings and stories from time, but it also freezes them.

¹ M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066-1397*, 2d ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

² The phrase “my wordes peynte” here has, of course, a double meaning since it can refer to a circumlocution but also, if understood literally, to a visual representation of his words.

³ Evans, Ruth. “Chaucer in Cyberspace: Medieval Technologies of Memory and *The House of Fame*.” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 23, 2001, 58.

⁴ Pierre Nora, « General Introduction: Between Memory and History,” in Pierre Nora et al., eds. *Realms of Memory, European Perspectives: A series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1996, p. 1

⁵ “I sing of arms and the man, he who, exiled by fate, first came from the coast of Troy to Italy, and to Lavinian shore.”

⁶ Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'*, 29.

⁷ See for instance I. l. 293-310.

⁸ Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'*, 29.

⁹ Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'*, 30-31.

¹⁰ Taylor, Karla. *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1989, 22.

¹¹ “design before my eyes the signs we speak”

¹² “Love justice, you rulers of the earth”

¹³“even Nature, there, would feel defeated”

¹⁴ Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'*, 1989, 23.

¹⁵ David Wallace, “Chaucer's Continental Inheritance: the Early Poems and Troilus and Criseyde,” in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 21.

¹⁶ Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'*, 32.

¹⁷ Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'*, 33.

¹⁸ Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever*, p. 12.

¹⁹ Evans, Ruth. “Chaucer in Cyberspace: Medieval Technologies of Memory and *The House of Fame*.” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 23, 2001, 63.