REMEMBERING THE CONVIVIO: DANTE AND THE ART OF MEMORY

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The question of memory in Dante’s works has fascinated many scholars. From Frances Yates’s remarks on the mnemonics of *Inferno* in *The Art of Memory* to Mary Carruthers’s references to the poem in *The Book of Memory*, the question of memory has been a salient one for Dante scholarship. Nevertheless, scholars have mainly focused their attention on the issue of memory in the *Commedia* and in the *Vita Nuova*, ignoring almost entirely the role that memory plays in the most overtly philosophical of Dante’s works, the *Convivio*. 2

The reasons behind this choice are likely due to the absence in the *Convivio* of the clear references to memory one finds in both the *Commedia* and in the *Vita Nuova*. On the one hand, the *Vita Nuova* opens with Dante’s explicit mention of his memory (“In quella parte del libro de


la mia memoria” (1.1) [In my Book of Memory]), which is compared to the structure of a medieval manuscript, divided into chapters and decorated by rubrics. On the other hand, the structural significance of numbers in the *Commedia*, its rhyme scheme (*terza rima*), and the vividness of Dante’s character portraits have led various scholars to view the poem as an art of memory. More recently, Harald Weinrich has recognized the mnemonic value of the *Commedia* as “a precise literary imitation of the ancient art of memory,” while Pearce has shown how the poem may be seen as the primary referent for an analysis of memory in Dante.

As is clear from this brief *status quaestionis*, scholars have elected either to ignore the issue of memory in the *Convivio*, or to use it as a resource for investigating Dante’s philosophical approach to memory in the *Commedia*. By studying the question of memory in the *Convivio* independently from that of the *Commedia*, however, we may gain a more precise understanding of Dante’s interest in and use of mnemonic devices. The relatively numerous references to memory in the *Convivio* suggest that Dante, while writing a philosophically charged commentary on his own love poetry, was also pointing the reader towards a method of memorization based on places and images, namely, the rhetorical art of memory from classical antiquity. This study explores the allusion to mnemonic techniques inherent in the very title of *Convivio*, then moves on to analyze the most relevant occurrences of *memoria* within the text, a term which Dante uses in connection with powerfully charged images whose emotional impact serves to elicit memory.

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4 Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 16, 29.
When Pearce posed the question as to whether Dante knew and practiced the art of memory, he concluded that “given Dante’s rhetorical training and acquaintance with the philosophical and theological literature of his day, it is virtually inconceivable that he should have been unfamiliar with the art of local memory.” Working from this premise, I will begin my analysis of the Convivio with a consideration of its title, which immediately poses an intellectual puzzle to its reader. The implications of the metaphor of the “convivio,” or “banquet,” are at least twofold. Foregrounding the image of the table on which the banquet will be consumed, Dante remarks that at first there is the divine table, the “mensa dove lo pane degli angeli si manuca” (1.1.7) [the table where the bread of the angels is eaten] and secondly Dante’s own table, his literary work, through which he intends to “fare un generale convivio” (1.1.11) [to present to all men a banquet]. Paola Nasti has demonstrated the connection between the Convivio and Solomonic wisdom by showing how the “banquet” alludes to a passage from the book of Proverbs, in which Wisdom herself prepares a table, a mensa. The image of the convivium of wisdom is also well documented in the Platonic tradition of the Symposium and in the Western Christian canon, from authors such as St. Ambrose to Honorius of Autun. Though the banquet as a biblical metaphor has long been acknowledged, its use as a metaphor for the art of memory has not been duly recognized.

During the Middle Ages the metaphor of the banquet was often used to refer to an artificial system to enhance memory. This image was passed on through Cicero’s teachings on

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8 Pearce, “Dante and the Art of Memory,” 25.
10 Nasti, Favole d’amore e ’saver profondo’,” 93-111.
11 On the former tradition, see Maria Corti, Scritti su Cavalcanti e Dante, 105. On the latter, see St. Ambrose’s characterization of scripture: “scriptura divina convivium sapentiae est” [divine scripture is the banquet of wisdom] (De Officis libri III in PL 16 col. 71b). Cf. Honorius of Autun: “In hac domo sapientia ad se venientibus convivium praeperat…” [In this house, wisdom prepares a banquet for those who are coming to her] (De animae exilio et patria PL 172, col. 1245d). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Latin are my own.
rhetoric in *De oratore*. In a famous passage, Anthony explains the creation of the art of memory by telling the story of the Greek poet Simonides, who had participated in a banquet that tragically ended with the collapse of the roof.\(^{12}\) Simonides, who left the banquet before the disaster, later remembers the guests’ names by recalling their location at the table and forming images of the places where they were seated. Artificial memory traditionally applied to rhetoric, which consisted of a system of rules intended to strengthen natural memory through the use of places and images (*per loca et imagines*) was thus intrinsically tied to the metaphor of the banquet.\(^{13}\)

Cicero introduced the notion of memory as part of the rhetorical disciplines. This categorization, which is different from St. Augustine’s essentially epistemological model of memory as a faculty of the soul, endured within the Latin tradition, especially in the works of teachers of oratory. For example, the *Rhetoric to Herennius* and Quintilian’s *Institutes of Oratory* also contained accounts of artificial memory, and through these Latin sources it became an integral part of medieval education.\(^{14}\) Among the Medieval works on poetics closer to Dante's time, it is worth mentioning Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria Nova*, whose treatment of Rhetoric

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\(^{12}\) “*gratiamque habeo Simonidi illi Cio quem primum ferunt artem memoriae protulisse. Dicunt enim cum cenaret Crannone in Thessalia Simonides apud Scopam […]*” (2.86.351) [and I am grateful to the famous Simonides of Ceos, who is said to have first invented the science of mnemonics. There is a story that Simonides was dining at the house of a wealthy nobleman named Scopas at Crannon in Thessaly [. . .]] (Cicero, *De Oratore*, trans. E.W. Sutton [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942], 464-469).


follows closely that of the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*.\(^{15}\) It is interesting to note that the *Poetria Nova* often uses the metaphor of the banquet referred to Rhetoric, an example of it can be found when Geoffrey writes: “The greater number of dishes in the banquet and the tardy delay of the feast make for dignity,”\(^{16}\) and that it devotes an entire section, if short (section IX), to the analysis of memory as a part of Rhetoric, following what he calls *Tullius*.\(^{17}\) Despite the strong debt to the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, though, the *Poetria Nova* does not explain in detail the art of memory *per loca et imagines*, and it limits itself to a series of cursory remarks: “Tradit imaginibus peregrinis Tullius artem./ Qua meminisse decet.” [Tully teaches the art of memory by means of wandering images].\(^{18}\) Geoffrey, in fact, prefers to stress the importance of delight (*delectatio*) for memory, even defining memory as the “cell of delight.”\(^{19}\)

It is in encyclopedic works such as Martianus Capella’s *On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, that we find accounts of the benefits and precepts of the art of memory that closely follow those of the classical tradition. Capella, in fact, mentions the story of Simonides and links the creation of the art of memory to the story of a disrupted banquet. In the section on memory, he discusses the precepts of memorization starting with an account of the discovery of the art of memory, which focuses on its mythical founder: “Simonides huius rei praecepta invenisse perhibetur, poeta idemque philosophus; cum enim *convivii locus* subito corruisset, nec possent

\(^{15}\) Gallo identifies the Pseudo- Ciceronian *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, Cicero’s *De Inventione* and Horace’s *Ars Poetica* as the three main sources for the *Poetria Nova*. For a detailed analysis of Geoffrey’s sources in the specific divisions of the *Poetria Nova*, see Gallo, *The Poetria Nova and its Sources*, 133-231. On the possibility that Dante knew and used the *Poetria Nova*, see Bertolucci Pizzoruso, Valeria, “Gli smaraldi di Beatrice,” *Studi Mediolatini e Volgari* 17 (1969) 7-16, as well as Woods, Marjorie Curry, *Classroom Commentaries: Teaching the Poetria Nova Across Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010, 67 and footnote 105.


\(^{17}\) In this particular section he could also be following Quintilian. On the relationship between Geoffrey De Vinsauf’s *Poetria Nova* and Quintilian *Institutio Oratoria* see Gallo, *The Poetria Nova and Its Sources*, pp. 220-223 as well as “Geoffrey after Quintilian” in Woods, *Classroom Commentaries*, pp. 255-258. See also Woods, Marjorie Curry, *An Early Commentary on the Poetria Nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf*, p. xvi.

\(^{18}\) Gallo, *The Poetria Nova and Its Sources*, 122-123.

\(^{19}\) “Cellula deliciarum”, Gallo, *The Poetria Nova and Its Sources*, 120-121.
propinqui obtritos internoscere, discumbentium ordinem nominaque memoria recordante suggestit. Quo adominitus intellexit ordinem esse, qui memoriae praecepta conferret” [5.538; italics mine] [Simonides, who was both poet and philosopher, is said to have discovered the rules of this subject; for when a banquet hall suddenly collapsed, and the next of kin could not identify those buried, he supplied the seating order and names from memory. From this experience he learned that it is order which makes possible the rules of memory].

Simonides, clearly defined here as both a poet and a philosopher, is a follower of the Muses, the daughters of Mnemosyne, of memory herself, and of Zeus, intended here as the patron deity of knowledge, who also fathered Athena, the goddess of wisdom. According to the myth, the Muses enjoyed the protection of Apollo, the god of music and the arts. Thus, a double link emerges that leads us directly to the Convivio: first, between banquets and memory; second, between poetry and philosophy. Capella also emphasizes memorization’s dependence upon order, a typical precept of the art of memory that is echoed in Convivio. Since Dante was familiar with these texts and clearly interested in rhetorical techniques, his image of the banquet was quite likely an allusion to the art of memory. Capella’s text appears to have been particularly influential for Dante, both on a general level, given the relationship between philosophy and poetry at the heart of Convivio, and on a more textual level, due to the importance of order for memorization, a theme that is introduced at the outset of the work: “Nel cominciamento di ciascuno bene ordinato convivio. . .” (1.2.1) [At the beginning of every well-ordered banquet. . .]

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21 Martianus Capella’s De Nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae has been considered as a possible source for Dante by many scholars. In particular, see Mazzotta, Dante’s Vision and the Circle of Knowledge, 4 and 99-100 as well as Anderson, William, Dante the Maker, (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1980), 116-117, 135 (in specific connection with memory) and 326-328; Cestaro, Gary, Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 20-25; Moevs, Christian, The Metaphysics of Dante’s Comedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 137-139.
These textual influences suggest that the author of Convidio was not only providing access to a vast encyclopedic knowledge through commentary on his own love poems, but a means by which this information might be memorized, namely, an art of memory. In doing so, Dante casts himself as another Simonides, reuniting the characteristics of both poet and philosopher through the use of his own love poetry as the point of departure for a didactic text. The express intention of the Convivio is to show a path to wisdom, as is apparent from the first line of the text, which echoes Aristotle’s Metaphysics, “Si come dice lo filosofo nel principio de la Prima Filosofia, tutti gli uomini naturalmente desiderano il sapere” (1.1.1) [As the Philosopher says at the beginning of the First Philosophy, all men by nature desire to know]. The next statement reinforces the initial reference to man’s natural desire for knowledge by defining science as a perfection of the soul and a fundamental part of “la nostra ultima felicitade” (1.1.1) [our ultimate happiness]. Memory therefore assumes a critical role in allowing the human mind to retain knowledge and to acquire the habitus of science; in other words, it prepares the intellect to use the data acquired from the senses.

In order to understand Dante’s approach to memory, it will be helpful to first examine the occurrences of memoria in the Convivio, then to place them in relationship to Aristotelian and Augustinian theories of the mind, in addition to the rhetorical mnemonic techniques described by Cicero. My aim is to show that through a strategic use of this key term, Dante provides his readers with a method of remembering his text, thereby creating his own art of memory.

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22 On the theme of happiness in the Convivio, see Corti, Scritti su Cavalcanti e Dante, especially 75-82.
23 In Paradiso 5, Beatrice presents a more nuanced but similar understanding of the importance of memory for the acquisition of knowledge: “Apri la mente a quel ch'io ti paleso /e fermalvi entro; ché non fa scienza, /sanza lo ritenere, avere inteso” (40-42) [Open your mind to that which I reveal to you and fix it therewithin; for to have heard without retaining makes not knowledge]. All English translations of the Commedia are taken from Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970-75). I will return to the importance of the Aristotelian and Thomist theory of the habitus later in this essay.
24 An obvious point of contrast is Cavalcanti’s understanding of memory in “Donna me prega” as a purely a physical process. For a comparison of Dante’s and Cavalcanti’s notions of memory see, Corti, Scritti su Cavalcanti e Dante,
Weinrich studied the use of the terms memoria and mente in Dante, noticing how, even if the meaning of the two words can at times collapse (and in the Commedia and in the Vita Nuova the two words might be interchanged for metrical reasons), the author reserved two specific semantic areas for the word memoria.\textsuperscript{25} He distinguished between the genitive possessive use of the word, which pertains to the memory of a specific person, and the philosophical theological use, which refers to the faculty of memory as one of the three faculties of the soul, namely, memory, intellect, and will.\textsuperscript{26} Since this observation also applies to the Convivio, I have limited my analysis to the occurrences of this term. As will soon be evident, when Dante uses the word memoria, he is consciously pointing the reader towards the problem of memorization and recollection.\textsuperscript{27}

From the first appearance of the term in the Convivio, Dante directs his readers towards a Ciceronian art of memory. In the first book, while justifying his use of the vernacular to write a commentary on his own love poetry, Dante compares his commentary to a gift: “Onde acciò che ’l dono faccia lo ricevitore amico, conviene a lui essere utile, però che l’utilitade sigilla la memoria de la imagine del dono, la quale è nutrimento de l’amistade” (1.8.12) [Therefore, for a gift to make a friend of the recipient, it must be useful to him, because usefulness stamps the image of the gift in his memory--which is the nourishment of friendship]. Here, memory is conspicuously connected to an image, and to an emotion that impresses the memory of that image

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\item\textsuperscript{9-59, 61-94, and 178-199. Cf. Maria Luisa Ardizzone, Guido Cavalcanti: The Other Middle Ages (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2002), 47-70 and 103-133; Mazzotta, Dante’s Vision and the Circle of Knowledge, 60-1, 116-134.}
\item\textsuperscript{25} Weinrich, La memoria di Dante, 22-28.
\item\textsuperscript{26} Dante, Convivio 1.7.12
\item\textsuperscript{27} There is a strong ambivalence in Dante’s use of the word memoria, as he seems to oscillate between memoria as natural memory (memoria naturalis) and memoria as artificial memory (memoria artificialis), namely the result of applying mnemonic techniques to natural memory. I believe this ambivalence is intentional in Dante and can be traced not only in Convivio, but also in the Vita Nuova and even in the references to memory found in the Divine Comedy. On Dante’s ambiguity regarding the term memoria, see Antonelli, “Memoria rerum et memoria verborum,” 36-41; Pearce, “Dante and the Art of Memory,” 21-27; Weinrich, La memoria di Dante, 9-26. This study is only the beginning of a longer investigation that aims to clarify Dante’s ambiguous understanding of memory and how such understanding is tied to different rhetorical, philosophical and theological worldviews.
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within the mind. The reader of Dante’s *Convivio*, receiving it and recognizing it as a useful gift, should therefore impress it upon his memory using the techniques of memorization (*loca et imagines*), sealing it as if with wax. The verb *sigillare* (“to seal”) immediately evokes this particular image. The metaphor of the seal in the wax had been used to describe mnemonic processes since Aristotle’s text, *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*, and became well-known in the West first in the writing of Hugh of St. Victor and then in the scholastic tradition through the works of Albert the Great, especially in his commentary on *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*, and in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, both in his *Summa Theologica* and in his commentary on Aristotle’s work, the *Commentarium in Aristotelis De Memoria et Reminiscentia*.

Aquinas, following Albert, stresses the ethical character of memory, which is seen as a prerequisite for the acquisition of prudence, and defines memory according to his theory of the *habitus*. He considers memory a type of constant, stable, disposition of the soul, whose knowledge enables and influences the decision-making process, thereby affecting human behavior. In this sense, memory is what links knowledge and action, and is thus closely

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28 “For clearly one must think about that which is so generated through sensation in the soul, that is, in that part of the body which contains, as a sort of picture, and the state of having this we call ‘memory’; for the movement produced stamps almost a sort of impression of the sense-impression, similar to what is done by people using their seals” (*Aristotle on Memory and Recollection. Text, Translation, Interpretation, and Reception in Western Scholasticism*, trans. David Bloch [Leiden: Brill, 1997], 31). For discussion of the metaphor of the seal and wax, see Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 71.

29 Hugh of St. Victor, *De Institutione Novitiorum*, PL 176, col. 933b.


connected to the ability to make ethical decisions. At the same time, memory cannot be reduced to a purely natural process, since it can be enhanced by study and artificial techniques.\textsuperscript{32} As Carruthers has noted, Aquinas’s notion of memory is strongly influenced by the rhetorical tradition of artificial memory, as he quotes both Cicero’s \textit{De Oratore} and the Pseudo-Ciceronian \textit{Rhetorica ad Herennium}, a work which Aquinas still considered “Tully’s First and Second Rhetoric.”\textsuperscript{33} It therefore comes as little surprise that Dante, who was well-acquainted with both Cicero and Aquinas, should underscore memory’s ethical connotations and its potential for improvement through the use of artificial techniques and memory-images.

Moreover, in this initial formulation, memory is tied to the idea of a gift, which in turn nourishes friendship. From the very beginning of the text, Dante thus establishes a connection between memory and ethics through the concept of friendship, intended here both in the Ciceronian sense of a bond between virtuous men and in the broader Aristotelian sense of \textit{philia}, the perfect human relationship, based on the common pursuit of virtue.

The correlation between memory and ethics continues throughout the text, mediated by the notion of utility. Memorization is not only useful, but conducive to virtue, since it allows man to remember and to imitate examples of good behavior while avoiding those of vice, as Dante goes on to clarify in the fourth book of the \textit{Convivio}. Already within the first book, however, Dante stresses a similar concept by attributing the importance of his vernacular commentary to its usefulness and ease of memorization. “Non avrebbe lo latino così servito a molti: ché se noi reducemmo a memoria quello che di sovra è ragionato, li litterati fuori di lingua italica non averebbono potuto avere questo servigio” (1.9.2) [Latin would not have served many, for, if we call to mind what was said above, the learned to whom the Italian language is foreign could not


\textsuperscript{33} See Carruthers, \textit{The Book of Memory}, 65.
have availed themselves of this service].

Consequently, the Convivio becomes a gift of knowledge and understanding that the author presents to his readers. Moreover, the usefulness of such a gift assumes here a specific linguistic quality. By placing this reference to memory so close to that of the Italian vernacular, Dante adumbrates the connection between memorization and language. Since that which we seek to memorize is often composed of words which vary from one language to another, it is easier to memorize a concept expressed within one’s mother tongue. While accounting for his revolutionary choice of the Tuscan vernacular for a didactic text, Dante uses memory as a tool in his intellectual battle in favor of the vulgar tongue. In alluding to the idea of a national language, he contributes to its very creation, ennobling his local vernacular through his own philosophical writing.

In his other major work written during the period of his exile, De vulgari eloquentia, Dante clarifies this point by establishing the nobility of the vernacular in general before embarking on his quest for the elusive “most illustrious vernacular,” the basis for a unified Italian language.34 While memory is not a focal point of De vulgari eloquentia, it appears several times throughout the treatise. In book one, we find two references to the semantic realm of memoria before Dante goes on to narrate the story of the disintegration of the one original language into many as a consequence of men’s pride in the tower of Babel.35 Here, Dante first defines God’s punishment

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34 The relationship between the Convivio and the De vulgari eloquentia has been relatively under-examined. On the dating of both texts, see Giorgio Petrocchi, Vita di Dante. For an updated bibliography on current scholarly debates, see Albert Ascoli, Dante and the Making of a Modern Author, 135, 8n.

35 “Volentes igitur modum tradere quo ligari hec digna existant, primo dicimus esse admemoriam reducendum, quod vulgariter poetantes sua poemata multimode protulerunt, quidam per cantiones, quidam per ballatas, quidam per sonitus, quidam per alios inlegitimos et inregulares modos, ut inferius ostendetur” (2.3.2) [Wishing, then, to explain how these worthy themes are to be connected in poetry, I shall first say that it ought to be remembered that writers of poetry in the vernacular have composed their poems using many different forms, some writing canzoni, some ballate, some sonnets, and some using other illegitimate and irregular forms, as will be shown below]. The English translation is taken from Dante Alighieri, De vulgari eloquentia, trans. Steven Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). On the episode of the tower of Babel, see Maria Corti, Viaggio testuale (Turin: Einaudi, 1978), 243-56.
as “memorable,” then mentions the importance of memorizing, that is, of keeping in mind, the tale that led to the confusion of tongues.

These two passages stress the relationship between memory and language, which Dante later refines in his discussion of the different poetic styles in the vernacular. Poetry here becomes memory’s closest ally; at the same time, memory assumes the privileged role of the teacher with respect to poetic composition. To learn how to write good poetry, one must memorize the work of good poets. Dante presents a lengthy list of poems in the vernacular, culminating with his own canzone “Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona,” and then appeals directly to the reader: “Nec mireris, lector, de tot reductis autoribus ad memoriam: non enim hanc quam supremam vocamus constructionem nisi per huiusmodi exempla possumus indicare” (2.6.7) [Nor should you be surprised, reader, if so many authorities are recalled to your memory here; for I could not make clear what I mean by the supreme degree of construction other than by providing examples of this kind]. According to this view, only through the exempla of good poetry can one explain what constitutes it. It is remarkable that in this list, Dante’s own work occupies a privileged position as the poem most spatially proximate to the word memoria. The ultimate message of this section of the treatise is that in order to become a good poet, one must memorize and learn from Dante’s own poetry.

This use of Dante’s poetry as a means to stimulate memory resurfaces in the Convivio. In the second book, Dante employs one of his more famous canzoni to emphasize the need to aid memory and the means by which to do it. While proposing a full commentary on his song “Voi ch’intendendo il terzo ciel movete,” the poet remarks:

convenne, prima che questo nuovo amore fosse perfetto, molta battaglia intra lo pensiero

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37 On Dante's strategy of creating his own authority through self-citation and self-commentary, see Ascoli, “The Unfinished Author,” 45-66 and Dante and the Making of a Modern Author.
del suo nutrimento e quello che li era contraro, lo quale per quella gloriosa Beatrice tenea ancora la rocca de la mia mente. Però che l'uno era soccorso de la parte dinanzi continuamente, e l’altro de la parte de la memoria di dietro. (Conv. 2.2.3-4)

[It was necessary before this new love could become perfect that there be much strife between the thought that nourished it and the one that opposed it, which still held the citadel of my mind on behalf of that glorious Beatrice. For the one was continually reinforced by the part of the memory in front, and the other by the part of the memory in back.]

Technically, Dante is speaking here about the battle in his mind between the love for the new lady, Lady Philosophy, and the old love for Beatrice, a conflict also described in the *Vita Nuova*. On closer analysis, however, the close repetition of the word *memoria* and the idea of aiding it (*soccorrere*), reveal how Dante subtly points the readers towards the necessity of aiding memory. Such support can be provided to memory through meaningful, emotively impressive images, which are exemplified by the two ladies who exerted a strong emotional influence on Dante himself.

Moreover, Dante describes the process of his enamorment of Lady Philosophy as one based on nourishment, thereby evoking again the metaphor of eating. While illustrating how Dante’s thought finds sustenance both in the teaching of Philosophy and in the thought of Beatrice, the text implicitly reinforces, through the notion of nutrition, the connection between banquets, memory, and the acquisition of knowledge already established by the allusion to the banquets of Simonides and that of Wisdom.

The other connection Dante establishes here is the essential link between memory and poetry, in particular, love poetry. This nexus lies at the center of the *Vita Nuova*, in its parallel narrative of Dante’s poetic development and his love for Beatrice. Memory is the crucial factor that enables the act of writing, since it signals a distance in time, which naturally brings the author

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to reflection and therefore to poetry. As the Greek myth has it, Memory generates the Muses, and is thus the prerequisite for artistic expression. On a more technical level, however, what brings together poetry and the art of memory is the evocative power of images, which can be enhanced through an appeal to strong emotions, such as love or friendship.

The thought of Beatrice becomes for Dante conducive to memorization, and it is in this sense that the use of her image as a memory aid reappears in the second book of Convivio:

\[ \text{e questa anima non è altro che un altro pensiero, accompagnato di consentimento, che, repugnando a questo, commenda e abbellisce la memoria di quella gloriosa Beatrice. Ma però che ancora l’ultima sentenza de la mente, cioè lo consentimento, si tenea per questo pensiero che la memoria aiutava, chiamo lui anima e l’altro spirito.} \]

(2.6.7)

[This soul is nothing other than another thought accompanied by an act of assent, which, opposing the former, praises and adorns the memory of that glorious Beatrice. But since the final verdict of my mind (that is, its act of assent) was still held fast by this thought which my memory reinforces, I call it soul and the other spirit.]

Here, Beatrice’s image is described as embellished by artificial means, which, as we have seen, are also identified with rhetorical mnemonic techniques. Thanks to this act of artificial adornment, the image of the lady can perform its auxiliary function for the memory of the poet. Thus, in this passage Dante presents the reader with a practical example of how to keep things in mind, how to memorize them. The glory of Beatrice and her beauty affect the mind of the poet, exciting his emotions and his imagination, and thus aiding the process of memorization, as well as that of the creation of poetry.

At the end of book two, Dante also references the Augustinian theory of memory, pointing once again to the connection between memory and ethics: “E là dove dice: le mie pari, s’intende l’anime libere de le misere e vili delettazioni e de li vulgari costumi, d’ingegno e di memoria dotate” (2.15.8) [Where it says the likes of me is meant the souls that are free from wretched and

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39 Dante, Convivio 2.6.8
40 Augustine of Hippo, Confessiones 10.8-27 in CCSL 27.
vile delights and from vulgar habits, and endowed with intellect and memory]. With this sentence, Dante, while explaining the literal sense of his canzone, characterizes memory as a faculty of the soul. When souls are endowed with good will, and free from vice, they can achieve understanding and memory.\textsuperscript{41} Such a description brings out the ethical character of memory, linking the ability to remember with moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities.

The poet’s mind naturally remembers with greater ease the object of his love. This correspondence between love and memory calls into question the relationship between love and time, since the latter can be interpreted in Augustinian terms as a movement of the soul, as it is perceived by the Trinitarian structure of the human mind.\textsuperscript{42} Dante harmonizes this Christianized view of memory with the Aristotelian notion of memory as recollection through the notion of time.

Memory is what happens in time, presupposing its very passage. As Aristotle writes in \textit{On Memory and Recollection}, “there is no memory of the now in the now. For of the present there is sensation, of the future there is expectation, and of the past there is memory. Therefore all memory happens with time.”\textsuperscript{43} Commenting on this passage, Aquinas had stressed the necessity of human apprehension, a cognitive act, in order to activate memory: man can only remember what has been experienced, either directly or through alternative means of gaining knowledge.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{44} “Sed intentio Philosophi est dicere quod memoria est praeteritorum quantum ad nostrum apprehensionem, idest quod prius sensimus vel intelleximus aliqua indifferenter, sive illae res secundum se consideratae sunt in praesenti, sive non” (Aquinas, \textit{In Aristotelis libros De Memoria et Reminescentia Commentarium}, 89) [So the Philosopher's intention is to say that memory is of things that are in the past as far as our apprehension of them goes, i.e., that we
The experience of love thus represents a privileged avenue to gaining knowledge, as it involves both the intellect and the will, and naturally appeals to memory. The fragility of love, that is, its temporal nature, further underscores the relationship between love and time. Dante’s original love for Beatrice was as subject to time as Beatrice herself. The Vita Nuova tells the story of Dante’s reaction to Beatrice’s death, while the Convivio marks the moment in which Beatrice becomes for Dante a privileged aid to memory and therefore knowledge.

When Beatrice is mentioned in the Convivio, she can be interpreted as a highly emotionally and ethically charged memory image, similar to those associated with rhetorical mnemonic techniques. Dante has in fact just specified that the third heaven mentioned in his canzone signifies Rhetoric, “per lo terzo cielo io intendo la Rettorica, la quale al terzo cielo è simigliata”[45] (2.14.20) [by the third heaven I mean Rhetoric, which resembles the third heaven]. Such an interpretation of Beatrice in relationship to memory is corroborated by the fact that in the following book of the Convivio, Dante uses the word memory twice, both times stressing the importance of remembering what he had been explaining previously.

The text refers not only to Beatrice, but also to Lady Philosophy as memory-images, both feminine embodiments of abstract concepts, employed to appeal to the reader’s memory. Intended in this light, the two occurrences of memoria in book three are key to understanding Dante’s signal to his audience. The author mentions the word memoria in a crucial moment of his gloss on “Amor che nella mente mi ragiona.” He equates philosophy with wisdom, specifically God’s wisdom, because in God we find the perfection of love, understanding and memory. “Ché se a memoria si reduce ciò che detto è di sopra, filosofia è uno amoroso uso di sapienza, lo quale

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[45] For an interpretation of this passage, see Mazzotta, Dante’s Vision and the Circle of Knowledge, 56-74, especially 56-60.
massimamente è in Dio, però che in lui è somma sapienza e sommo amore e sommo atto” (3.12.12) [For if we recall what has been said above, Philosophy is a loving use of the wisdom which exists in the greatest measure in God, since supreme wisdom, supreme love, and supreme actuality are found in him]. Again in the following chapter he reiterates a similar concept: “Dove si vuole a memoria reducere che di sopra è detto che amore è forma di Filosofia, e però qui si chiama anima di lei” (3.13.10) [Here we must call to mind what has been said above: namely, that love is the form of Philosophy and therefore is here called her soul]. Here, the word memoria is used to stress the need for remembering the theoretical concept explained before, namely, that love is a form of philosophy. After establishing the link between memory and understanding, Dante then reiterates the necessity of memory (and of aids to memory) to reach a correct understanding of philosophy. Thus, the author indicates for his reader not only what should be kept in mind, but the importance of memorization and of the techniques to achieve it, such as the use of emotionally charged images.

As Dante stated previously, philosophy should be represented as a beautiful lady, “Si come l’ordine vuole ancora dal principio ritornando, dico che questa donna è quella donna de lo ’ntelletto che Filosofia si chiama” (3.11.1) [Returning again to the beginning, as the order requires, I say that this lady is that lady of the intellect who is called Philosophy]. This image of philosophy as a lady is also linked to the idea of order, which, as we know from Quintilian and from Geoffrey of Vinsauf, among others, is one of the fundamental features both of mnemonic devices and of rhetorical techniques. Subsequently, Dante reinforces the connection between memory and ethical behavior through examples of emotionally charged mental images that can be used as aides to memory. The fourth book of the Convivio contains a discussion of nobility, an
almost scholastic *quaestio de nobilitate*, that appears unrelated to the question of memory. And yet in this book the occurrences of *memoria* increase significantly: the term appears used twelve times.

Dante begins by referring to the classical precepts of the art of memory, reminding the reader of the importance of brevity, since long chapters are enemies to memorization. Slightly later, he refers to the memory of specific individuals celebrated for their good deeds, creating a mental image of them:

*Cui non è ancora [nel cuore] lo buono re di Castella, o il Saladino, o il buono Marchese di Monferrato, o il buono Conte di Tolosa, o Beltramo dal Bornio, o Galasso di Montefeltro? Quando de le loro messioni si fa menzione, certo nonsolamente quelli che ciò farebbero volentieri, ma quelli prima morire vorrebbero che ciò fare, amore hanno a la memoria di costoro. (4.11.14)*

[Who does not keep a place [in his heart] for the good King of Castile, or Saladin, or the good Marquis of Monferrato, or the good Count of Toulouse, or Bertran de Born, or Galeazzo of Montefeltro? When mention is made of their gifts, certainly not only those who would willingly do the same, but those as well who would sooner die than do the same, retain in their memory a love for these men.]

This reference to memory works in two ways. On the one hand, it ties memory to good deeds, to ethical behavior, and to the love that such good deeds create; on the other hand, it stresses the importance of remembering the individual who has performed such actions, creating a mental image of them, and eliciting a strong emotional reaction that facilitates the retention of their memory. Through these *exempla* Dante emphasizes the didactic value of his text in particular and of literature in general, which is more apt than philosophy to generate beautiful images that can be fixed within one’s memory given their strong appeal to the emotions.

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47 The present study covers the occurrences of the word in books one through three. As to the instances in book four, it is circumscribed by the particularly salient instances mentioned below. In book one, *memoria* is mentioned twice; in paragraphs 8.12 and 9.2. In book two, it occurs three times: in paragraphs 11.3-4; 6.8 and 15.8. In book three, there are two occurrences of the term, in paragraphs 12.12 and 13.10. In striking contrast, in book four, it appears in more than nine instances: paragraphs 4.4; 11.14; 14.8; 14.9; 14.11; twice in 14.14; 27.5 and 28.11-12.
The intersection of philosophy and literature in *Convivio* also emerges in Dante’s description of the opposite of memory, forgetfulness. Earlier on in book four, Dante once again invokes the Aristotelian concept of memory from *On Memory and Reminiscence*, when he describes forgetfulness (*oblivione*) as “una corruzione di memoria” (4.4.14) [a deterioration of memory]. He explains the act of forgetting as the consequence of the corruption of a moral habit, not merely a dysfunction of a faculty of the soul. Dante seems to interpret Aristotle via Aquinas’s theory of the *habitus*, oblivion amounting to a “corruption” of an otherwise morally good disposition.

Later in book four, Dante explores the positive outcome of the *habitus* of good memory by tying *memoria* to ethical behavior and to the benefits of remembering past moral actions: “E benedice anco la nobile anima in questa etade li tempi passati; e bene li può benedicere; però che, per quelli rivolvendo la sua memoria, essa si rimembra de le sue diritte operazioni” (4.28.11) [The noble soul in this age of life blesses times past, and well may it bless them, because by turning its memory to them it recalls its virtuous act.] By linking the practice of memory with that of good deeds (“diritte operazioni”), Dante creates a virtuous circle between memory and actions. Interestingly, while connecting memory with ethics, Dante once more associates the image of the noble soul with that of a memorable woman, in this case, Marcia, Cato’s wife, “per la quale Marzia s’intende la nobile anima”(4.28.13) [here Marcia signifies the noble soul]. The symbolism of Cato and his wife takes on a double valence. Not only does the allusion to the famous Roman couple illustrate the relationship between God and the soul in its various ages;\(^{48}\) it also it provides a powerful image, that of a beautiful lady, Marcia, who could be used, like Beatrice or Lady Philosophy, to facilitate memorization and consequently moral conduct.

Based on Dante’s reference to *memoria* at the end of the fourth book of the *Convivio*,

\(^{48}\) On the symbolism of Cato, see Mazzotta, *Dante Poet of the Desert*, 38-41.
ethic behavior appears to be the result of the practical application of the virtue of prudence:

Convieni adunque essere prudente, cioè savio: e a ciò essere si richiede buona memoria de le vedute cose, buona conoscenza de le presenti e buona provedenza de le future. E, sì come dice lo Filosofo nel sesto de l’Etica, ‘impossibile è essere savio a chi non è buono.’ (4.27.5)

[One should therefore be prudent (that is, wise), and being wise requires a good memory of things seen, a good knowledge of things present, and a good foresight of things future. For as the Philosopher says in the sixth book of the Ethics, “It is impossible for a man to be wise without being good.”]

The link between prudence and memory was typical of the Ciceronian tradition and was found also in Brunetto Latini’s didactic and encyclopedic text, Li livres dou Trésor. By quoting Aristotle immediately following the illustration of a concept of memory indebted to Cicero’s On Invention, Dante harmonizes the Ciceronian and Aristotelian concepts of memory, allowing the reader to use a Ciceronian art of memory within an Aristotelian philosophical context. By doing so, Dante follows in the wake of Aquinas. Unlike the theologian, however, he provides not only a philosophical background for the use of artificial memory, but poetic metaphors to serve as effective memory-images.

This concern for memorization is poignantly reflected in the very structure of the Convivio. The original plan of the treatise included fifteen books: an introduction and fourteen books, one for each poetic commentary. While scholars have noted the numerological features of both the Vita Nuova and the Commedia, less attention has been paid to this aspect of the Convivio. The work appears to have been organized around the number seven, the sum of the four cardinal and

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49 Brunetto Latini, Dante’s teacher of rhetoric, is also one of the most prominent Ciceronian authors of the 13th c. It is probably through Brunetto’s writings that Dante first came in touch with Ciceronian rhetoric, in particular through the Rettorica, a commentary and vulgarization of Cicero’s De Inventione. On this topic see in particular T. Davis, “Brunetto Latini and Dante”, Studi Medievali VIII (1967), 421-50.


three theological virtues, the number of vices, and the number of liberal arts. At the same time, fifteen is the number of virtues according to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, ten of which were moral and five of which were intellectual. In light of the foregoing analysis of *memoria* in the *Convivio*, Dante’s use of the term may also indicate a numerological scheme, built around the number fourteen, two times seven. If in chapter fourteen of the fourth book alone, while exploring the link between memory and nobility, Dante uses the word six times (twice in paragraph fourteen), the term’s concentrated appearance in sections marked by the number fourteen might point to a numerological mnemonic device.\(^{52}\)

Throughout the *Convivio*, Dante’s strategic use of the term *memoria* in connection with powerful and evocative images indicates a clear awareness of the art of memory’s basic precepts. By developing this connection in order to guide his reader towards the acquisition and the retention of knowledge, Dante’s notion of memory brings together his awareness of rhetorical techniques, his way of shaping the new Italian vernacular through evocative metaphors, and his broader philosophical and epistemological concerns. In doing so, it highlights the encyclopedic aims of Dante’s philosophical commentary on his own love poetry, the means by which he provides us not only with knowledge, but an efficient means of remembering it. The question of memory in the *Convivio* thus points towards a complex reflection on the multiple models of memory – rhetorical, philosophical, and theological – that Dante will conflate in the grand synthesis of the *Commedia*, in the knowledge that memory is the foundation of both poetry and philosophy.

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\(^{52}\) Though an in-depth analysis of the use of numbers in the *Convivio* lies beyond the scope of this essay, the work’s numerological structure suggests a sound basis for an art of memory.