



MEMORY AND IMAGINATION IN ITALIAN FICTION AND NON-FICTION

When examining the two apparently different mental processes of memory and imagination in the modern age, it is interesting to consider that imagination is viewed as responsible for creativity, while memory is not. Imagination is both ingenuity and a creative force capable of forming new ideas or concepts never before considered. We consider people to be “blessed” with rich or fertile imaginations; all words that speak to great creativity and inventiveness. Memory, on the other hand, is viewed nowadays in what might be termed a very technological way – this faculty “stores” and “remembers” information, in the same way as a computer’s module would store data. When searching through various English definitions of the word “memory,” not once do we encounter the word “creativity” or “ingenuity” – memory, unlike imagination, does nothing new for the modern world.

This elevation of the faculty of imagination over memory would have astounded ancient and medieval scholars. While modern thinkers prize imagination as the highest creative faculty (above memory and its implied ‘mechanical’ function of remembering) in the past memory was considered the fundamental exercise of the mind. It was in the memory that the intellect and the creative functions of the human faculties resided, in stark contrast to our modern views. Bernardo Gui wrote of Thomas Aquinas; “[h]is memory was extremely rich and retentive: whatever he had once read and grasped he never forgot; it was as if knowledge were ever increasing in his soul as page is added to page in the writing of a book.”¹ Aquinas was a student of the art of memory, a system of mnemonic devices that was passed to the Middle Ages as an essential element of rhetoric, one of the seven liberal arts that comprised the educational system in Ancient Greece and Rome. Memory was seen as a fundamental aspect of rhetoric, a gift you were born with, but which could be improved by developing its capacity for storing information, and then extrapolating from the various sources stored within to create new ideas and images.²

There are many examples of the shifts in significance and prominence that the *topoi* of memory and imagination have undergone over the past millennium. If we look at memory in the Renaissance, we find that it was described with so-called female qualities. Memory was considered a passive attribute, used to reinforce gender norms and behaviours. Imagination was similarly associated with the female: “Renaissance writers nearly all refer to Augustine's definition of image in *De trinitate*,* which allows woman, according to Marin Mersenne's interpretation, three faculties of mind: passive intellect (= memory), active intellect and will.”³ Imagination also plays a significant role in speculative fiction. Darko Suvin defines this as: “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.”⁴ Suvin’s “imaginative framework” necessitates the creation of a world in order to produce the sense of wonder

¹ ‘The Life of St. Thomas Aquinas’ by Bernardo Gui, and Bartholomew of Capua, “Testimony at the First Canonization Inquiry.” Translated by Foster, *Biographical Documents*, 50.

² Yates, Frances, *The Art of Memory*, 51-2.

³ Maclean, *Renaissance Notion of Woman*, 13.

⁴ Suvin, Darko, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: on the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, 7.

that characterizes the genre from a repository of past memory and lived experiences. These narratives have had a visionary, quasi-prophetic power, often successfully foreshadowing real-world technologies and social transformation in their exercise of the imagination. Both memory and imagination are needed to rethink the past and imagine a new future.

Another real-world example of the interplay between memory and imagination in literature can be found in the debate on the unclear border between fiction and life writing. Although fiction is generally viewed as the fruit of imagination, fiction writing often requires the author's exploration of their own memory. Writing autobiography, on the other hand, might also be considered as "imagining and constructing a personal fiction."⁵ Memory and imagination are also the subjects of neuroscientific discovery, as the horizons of what we know about our mind and consciousness continue to expand thanks to scientific endeavor.

From this brief survey, it is apparent that memory and imagination are interconnected throughout the history of literature, philosophical inquiry and the beginnings of what eventually becomes the study of neuroscience. This conference aims to examine the various roles played over the centuries by memory and imagination, either in relation to each other or as separate categories, in both works of Italian fiction and non-fiction.

Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Memory and/or Imagination in Italian Literature
- The Art of Memory
- The Role of Memory in the Theatre (for example, in the tradition of Commedia dell'Arte)
- Travelogues and/or Exploration Literature
- Speculative Fiction of the 20th and 21st Centuries
- Film and other media (television, radio, etc)
- Post-memory and Storytelling
- Migration Literature
- Memoirs and (Auto)-Biography; Trauma studies and Literature
- War Correspondence; "Il giorno della memoria"
- Neuroscience and the Humanities
- Intersections between Science, Psychology and Literature

Presentations are not to exceed 20 minutes, and may be given in either English or Italian. Proposals must include a paper title and an abstract (150 words maximum) along with a short bio. Proposals should be sent to the following address: gsaisconference2020@gmail.com . The deadline for submissions is **February 21st, 2020**.

⁵ Neale, Derek. "Writing and Remembering: Paradoxes of Memory, Imagination and Fiction in Stories about Lives," *Literature Compass* 8/12 (2011): 951.