

Traces of Orality and Memory in *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night* / *Marcas de oralidade e memória no Livro das mil e uma noites*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to find traces of orality and techniques of memory in some versions of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*. It stems, thus, from some reflections on the techniques of memory used by the Arab culture that were inherited from the Greek art of memory. These traces are analyzed under three perspectives: as sortilege (in the manner of Mnemosyne), as a way to imprint rhythm and cadency on the tales, and as the architecture of memory.

KEYWORDS: Orality; Memory; Sortilege; Rhythm; Architecture; Thousand Nights and One Night

RESUMO

O artigo pretende detectar a presença de marcas de oralidade e técnicas de memória presentes em algumas versões do Livro das mil e uma noites. Para isso parte de algumas considerações sobre as técnicas de memória utilizadas na cultura árabe, herdadas da mnemotécnica grega para, em seguida analisar essas marcas sob três perspectivas: como sortilégio (à maneira de Mnemosyne), como forma de imprimir ritmo e cadência aos contos e, finalmente, como arquitetura da memória.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Oralidade; Memória; Sortilégio; Ritmo; Arquitetura; Mil e uma noites

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Introduction

The stories from *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*¹ (henceforth *The Book*) were told by men in charge of amusing insomniac kings by telling them stories during the night even before the first manuscript was carefully drawn by some copyist from the Orient. The Catalog (*Kitab al-fihrist*), an index of Arabic literary works collected by Ibn al-Nadim, refers to the *Nights* as a lost book entitled *Hasar Afsanah*. According to Ibn al-Nadim, who called those narrators *confabulatores nocturne*, although Alexander of Macedon was the first to gather around him men who were in charge of telling him stories, the emperors who succeeded him also made use of the *Hazar Afsana* (BORGES, 1984).²

If this hypothesis cannot be confirmed, it can at least be demonstrated in the book, in which Queen Scheherazade would tell a king who is tormented by the fear of losing his throne or of being betrayed by women stories during the night. The theme of the insomniac king is recurrent in the tales and is also found in the stories that portray sultan Harun al-Rashid. In general, these stories begin when the caliph, taken by oppression, tells his vizier, “this night is exhausting and heavy on my chest. I want you to free me from my torment.” The natural solution to heal the sultan’s melancholy is to either tell him a story or go for a night walk on the streets of Baghdad. In the latter situation, which provokes new narratives, he and his servants are disguised as merchants or beggars.³

Another form of story transmission, way after the *confabulatores nocturni*, was through the figure of a rhapsode in Arabian coffee-rooms, namely, the *rawi*, a teller of *riwayas*, which, according to Haddad (1961, p.VI), originally mean oral narrations of stories. Edward Lane, one of the English translators of *The Book*, claims to have found around 50 narrators in Cairo in the 1850s that would retell stories of the book (LANE, 1908).

¹ TN. Despite the different titles given to the collection (A Thousand and One Nights, The Thousand and One Nights, One Thousand and One Arabian Nights, among others), we have opted to use the title of the version we will use, namely, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*, published by Routledge in four volumes. The references will be presented as tales are discussed and analyzed.

² BORGES, J. *Seven Nights*. Translated by Eliot Weinberger. New York: New Directions, 1984.

³ As an example, see The Tale of The Magic Book in *The Book*. [THE Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night: Volume IV. Translated by Powys Mathers. London; New York: Routledge, 2005a.]

Some attribute only a mnemonic function to the manuscripts. Marks on the margins would indicate that the narrator could modify the plot of the stories according to the type of audience or their reactions.

Although René Khawam (1986a), the French translator of *The Book*, knew the oral origin of the stories, he is opposed to the idea that they were a direct transcription of oral tales. Not only does he believe that such hypothesis presupposes a devaluation of the work (1986a, p.26), but he also defends that narrators used the written text (that is, the literary text), which got into circulation because of copyists, only as a source of inspiration. Modifications would occur somewhat similarly to what *aoidoi*, or bards, did to texts from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*: they adapted them according to the audience (KHAWAM, 1986b, p.16).

On the other hand, Jamil Haddad, taking a divergent stand, highlights the difference between oral and written language. According to him,

In Arabic, there are significant discrepancies between educated and popular speech. Vocabulary considerably changes from one case to the other. Syntax changes. Sometimes phonetics changes. The changes are so substantial that, without our exaggerating it, we consider them two different languages: one of common men and the other of clergymen and mandarins (HADDAD, 1961, p.VII).⁴

However, the issue of orality in *The Book* cannot be examined unless the whole Arabic culture is taken into consideration. In effect, the unity of Islam was developed around the Koran, whose transmission for a long time depended on the exceptional effort of memorization. The etymology of Koran per se (*Qur'ān*, in Arabic) is connected to the idea of *oral communication* or *out-loud recitation* (BLACHERE, 1969, p.15).

The Book first existed as a dream that was revealed to Mohammed by Archangel Gabriel in Mecca from 610 AD on. For 20 years he had visions, and thanks to a thorough work of memory, the content of the messages was orally transmitted to the believers.

⁴ Text in Portuguese: “No árabe, entre o falar culto e popular são terríveis as discrepâncias. Muda num caso e no outro absolutamente o vocabulário. Muda a sintaxe. Quando não a fonética. De tal modo que podemos considerar, sem haver nisso exagero de monta, que se trata praticamente de duas línguas diferentes, uma para o homem da rua, outra para os clérigos e os mandarins.”

The written record of the Prophet's dreams started only later in a rudimentary manner: on scapula bones of camels and pieces of leather. Needless to say, these precarious inscriptions caused countless divergences in the understanding of the text. Besides the oral nature of Mohammed's apostleship, these circumstances contributed for the Koran to attain the status of Scripture, such as other holy books, and to become *Kitāb* (written text, book) only at the end of the Prophet's life.

The desire to have a sole book that would not lead to contradiction prompted religious leaders of Islam to destroy its "originals"; in other words, they destroyed any material that would contain revelations from the very lips of the Prophet. Until then the words of God and the Prophet "were cast into a domestic chest, in the custody of one of his wives" (GIBBON, 1998, p.800).⁵

The process of gathering fragmented compilations started with the aim at the collection of a *corpus*. Different reviews and systematizations were done in order to compile the *corpus* of Abu Bakr, which became the official Vulgate. However, even after the spelling reform, the role of the *Qāri'*, the reciter of the Koran, remained fundamental. The written text (similar to what happened to the manuscripts of *The Book*) guides the *Qāri'* so he does not omit words. In fact, the role of memorization was never relegated to a second plane.

Nevertheless, the differences in the text and in its interpretation remained. Only in the mid-10th century was the text of the Koran Vulgate standardized. At that time the manuscripts of *The Book*, which had been Arabized and undergone the process of Islamization, were also in circulation.

When the written Koran is confirmed, the Arabic language largely develops. The efforts to decipher the Holy Book are a result not only of the spelling reform, but also of the compilation of the Arabic grammar and of treatises on the history of the language. This close relationship between Arabic and Islam produced, as an inevitable consequence, the sacralization of the language.

Texts of a profane nature were not treated the same as Mohammed's revelations. For Juan Vernet (1968), a translator of the Koran and a scholar in Arabic literature, it is almost impossible to define the time when other literary texts appeared. Even the

⁵ GIBBON, E. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. London: Wordsworth Editions, 1998.

writing of verses of pre-Islamic poets was only validated two centuries after the Koran (1968, p.39).

Curiously *The Book* registers that the study of the Arabic language starts to be of importance. In the tales the use of grammar and rhetoric terms are used as love metaphors, provoking an unusual effect – to say the least. This is what Curtis (2013) showcases as he cites Enno Littmann's German version: “plying the particle of copulation in concert and joining the conjunctive with the conjoined, while her husband was a cast-out nunnation of construction” (2013, p.414).⁶ According to Curtis, such use, which had a predominantly obscene essence, was widespread throughout the late Antiquity and the Latin Middle Ages.

On the boundary between oral and written language, *The Book* bears unquestionable marks of its condition. If its oral nature is undisputable and its obscurity invokes Arian myths and the very origin of the art of narration, it was its written form that was always presented to the Western world. In this place of indetermination – writing that contains echoes of orality – we can clearly read/listen to the voices of the most remote art of memory: traces of the techniques used to convey millennially constituted knowledge that, despite their being noticeable, become more and more weakened in the texts.

In *The Book* memory is undoubtedly personified in Princess Shahrazad, who, in different versions of the tales, is described as someone who was “versed in the legends of the ancient kings and stories of peoples passed away.” She had also “collected a thousand books of tales” and “kept in her memory countless poems and tales; she learned popular proverbs, philosophers’ axioms and kings’ maxims.” She also had “courage above her sex, a refined spirit, and an extraordinary memory that enabled her to recollect everything she read. She applied herself to philosophy, medicine, history, and fine arts. She also wrote verses better than the most renowned poets of her time. She was endowed with majestic beauty, and her solid virtue surpassed all the other qualities.”⁷ As the Lady of legends and a Weaver of the Nights, Shahrazad, initiated in the enchantment of words and the secret of poetry, imprints, on *The Book*, a memory that is sortilege, rhythm, and architecture at the same time.

⁶ CURTIUS, E. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. Translated by Willard Trask. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013. (Bollingen Series, XXXVI).

⁷ We consulted different versions of *The Book* in order to present Shahrazad's characteristics.

1 The Bewitchment of Words

In order to understand memory as a form of sortilege, we need at first to relate the beautiful Muslim woman to the Greek Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, the mother of muses, who presides over the poetic function⁸ and possesses wisdom of the divinatory type: “she knows [...] ‘all that has been, all that is, and all that is to be’”⁹ (VERNANT, 2006, p.117).¹⁰ Her influence over *aoidoi* and diviners establishes an intriguing identity between these two types of characters of the Greek world. Poetry is understood as a form of divine possession and takes the form of ‘enthusiasm’ that prophets experience. In the Ancient World, diviners and poets are equally blind, but share the same extraordinary gift of ‘second sight.’ What sets them apart, though, is the point at which they look – diviners look at the future whereas poets look at the past about which they work – “the ancient times,” “the heroic age,” “the time of origins” (VERNANT, 2006, p.117).^{11 12}

Similar to the poets and diviners who are under the influence of *Mnemosyne*, Shahrazad has the absolute control over temporality. This is what Italo Calvino (2016) calls the capture of time: “knowing how to join one story to another, breaking off at just the right moment—two ways of manipulating the continuity and discontinuity of time” (p.45).¹³ The magic Shahrazad’s memory performs is nonetheless constrained to time. Her words are bewitching formulas that truly enchant the Sultan. This is the realm of “hearsay,” a specific form of understanding the world in the Middle Ages, in which the primacy of the senses depended on hearing, not on sight. Words had the gift of

⁸ For the connection between Shahrazad and Mnemosyne, see Menezes (1988).

⁹ TN. Vernant is quoting verses 37-38 from Hesiod’s *Theogony*: “telling of things that are, / Of things in future that shall be, and things that were before” [HESIOD. *Theogony and Works and Days*. Translated by Catherine M. Schlegel and Henry Weinfield. Ann Harbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2006, p.24].

¹⁰ VERNANT, J.-P. *Myth and Thought among the Greeks*. New York: Zone Books, 2006.

¹¹ For reference, see footnote 10.

¹² On poets’ blindness, see also Paul Zumthor’s *Oral Poetry: An Introduction* (1990), in which he mentions not only the long-standing association between the blind and the poet in the collective imaginary and in several cultures but also the almost always magic and supernatural nature of this condition. [ZUMTHOR, P. *Oral Poetry: An Introduction*. Translated by Kathryn Murphy-Judy. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.]

¹³ CALVINO, I. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Translated by Geoffrey Brock. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

producing an effect of enchantment, a *state of enthusiasm* (VERNANT, 2006, p.117)¹⁴ on the listener.

In *The Book hearsay* can be understood as an enchanting ritual through which someone – a prince, as it should be – is captured by love – for a princess, naturally – of whose beauty and virtues he *heard*. This type of love can be fatal. The lover is so bewitched that he gets sick, wastes away and becomes a prisoner of this passion until he attains the object of his desire. The lover is described as someone who is “plunged in some dark sea of grief. For love had eaten to [his] bones and fed upon the strength of his heart and liver” (THE BOOK, 2005a, p.263).¹⁵ ¹⁶ He even states the “the deaf and the blind are happy, for they are immune from those evils which enter by our ears and eyes” (THE BOOK, 2005a, p.280).¹⁷

If the love sickness caused by *hearsay* is almost always catastrophic, when it becomes the love for the city, the outcome is always happiness. This corresponds to the love for traveling and the symbolic role that cities, such as Bagdad, Basrah and Cairo, play in the narratives. These cities are the main route of merchants and the setting of countless wonders.

The main character of The Tale of the Yellow Youth is enchanted by *hearsay*. When he hears of a certain place, he is possessed by an unexpected love and an unstoppable desire to visit it. He abandons his family, sells all his properties and takes the first ship. This is Shahrazad’s narration:

Then, as I was distributing the fruit to my guests, I asked the captain whence it came. No sooner had he answered that he had brought it from Basrah and Baghdad than my guests began to expatiate on the marvels of those two cities, to vaunt the life that is lived there, the suavity of the climate, and the polished benevolence of the citizens. Each capped the other’s eulogy until I had no other thought except to visit the places at once. I sold all my goods and properties at a loss, got rid of my men and women slaves, and realised on my ladings and on all my ships with the exception of one. Thus I found myself possessed of a thousand dinars, without reckoning the jewels and ingots of gold which I already had by me. I reduced these riches to

¹⁴ For reference, see footnote 10.

¹⁵ TN. *The Book* is short for *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*, which will be used whenever there is a direct quotation of a tale of the collection.

¹⁶ For reference, see footnote 3.

¹⁷ These quotations are from The Splendid Tale of Prince Diamond (THE BOOK, 2005a, pp.259-294). For reference, see footnote 3.

their smallest compass and, embarking them upon the ship which I had reserved for my own use, set sail for Baghdad (THE BOOK, 2005b, p.56; our emphasis).¹⁸

If the enchantment caused by *hearsay* can be found at different places in the book, we can conceive of it also as the central theme of the book's universe, in which magic as a whole stems from the senses. *The Book* is nothing more than an enduring enchantment to which Shahrazad's numbing voice submits Prince Shahryar. She adds small doses of her magic potion, and the prince, under her spell, slowly transforms and forgets his fear of women. The Prince's transformation, which takes on the character of mystery revelation, renders Shahrazad's speech an initiating nature. We now go back to the prior connection between Shahrazad and the goddess of memory: Mnemosyne confers on the bard the privilege of undergoing a rite of passage, an experience of transformation by means of returning to the origins (VERNANT, 2006, p.121).¹⁹

For the sortilege to be complete, both memory and oblivion are summoned as the latter is also a form of magic and is inseparable from memory, for "Mnemosyne, she who makes one remember, is also she who erases the memory" (VERNANT, 2006, p.122).²⁰ Shahrazad's narrative magic numbs the prince through the recollection of the past; however, it also causes the oblivion of the present, which is related to the time when women betray him. Shahryar is gradually "healed," transformed through a binomial operation of remembering and forgetting.

Shahrazad weaves the text of her narratives. We find it important here to retrieve the etymological meaning of *text*: that which is woven – using, in Walter Benjamin's words, remembrance as the woof and forgetting as the warp, which is "a counterpart to Penelope's work rather than its likeness," for Shahrazad has to weave the thread of her speech at night, which is unraveled by the day (BENJAMIN, 2005, p. 238).²¹

The opposition between night and day related to the operations of memory in analogous manner to remembrance and oblivion plays an important role in *The Book*. Shahrazad's tales are always narrated at night, on the threshold of sleep, and are

¹⁸ THE Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night: Volume III. Translated by Powys Mathers. London; New York: Routledge, 2005b.

¹⁹ For reference, see footnote 10.

²⁰ For reference, see footnote 10.

²¹ BENJAMIN, W. On the Image of Proust. In: BENJAMIN, W. *Selected Writings*: Volume 2, Part 1-1927-1930. Translated by Rodney Livingstone and others; edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005, pp.237-247.

suspended at dawn. They are sleepless nights. Sleeping is pure and simple oblivion. It is the loss of self; it is blindness, disorientation (ELIADE, 1959).²² Sleeplessness reiterates the nature of initiation, which is inherent to *The Book* and in which the necessary ritualization – through the control of time – and the use of repeated formulas in the beginning and at the end of the celebration are present. The fundamental mythological drama, reported by every single myth, that is, the confrontation between night and day, is reproduced once again.

2 The Rhythm of Memory

As Shahrazad's fabulation is magical, it creates the illusion that the number of possible combinations in the supernatural universe is unlimited. However, the repertoire of combinations she uses in her tales can be perfectly classified. By intercrossing plots, characters and objects, she plays with the limited possibilities of language and uses the verb "to count" (tell a story)²³ in its mathematical and etymological meaning of enumerating.²⁴ Shahrazad's memory is also comprised of pre-established formulas and the continuous experimentation with rhythms, rhymes, and numbers, which is true inventiveness of a millenary art.

In ancient Greece, the training of bards bore several similarities with the memory techniques used in the Arabian tales. For poets to become bards, they had to undertake a rigorous training, and the divine nature of their duty did not attenuate their responsibility. The rules for oral composition and improvisation required the production of a previous draft of themes and tales, the use of formulaic diction, "predetermined combinations of words, and established rules of versification," and intensive exercises in memorization, which involved the recitation of long poems (VERNANT, 2006, p.118).²⁵

²² ELIADE, M. *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959.

²³ TN. Etymologically, the verb "to count," the verb used in Portuguese (*contar*), also means "to tell a story." (See the *Online Dictionary of Etymology* -<http://www.etymonline.com>.)

²⁴ See Calvino's *Cybernetics and Ghosts*. [CALVINO, I. *Cybernetics and Ghosts*. In: CALVINO, I. *The Uses of Literature*. Translated by William Weaver. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986, pp.3-27.]

²⁵ For reference, see footnote 10.

Also in Muslim tradition, mnemonics was fundamental not only to the learning of verses from the Koran, but also to the dissemination of Arabic poetry. As it is marked by an extraordinary notion of rhythm and musicality, Arabic poetry greatly favored memorization, allowing its verses to be known and recited even by uneducated people.

Because verses were lengthy and the writing system was precarious, a poet trusted his composition to the memory of a *rawi*, who would become his disciple later on. Similar to a Greek bard, a *rawi* underwent a long-term training, which allowed him to become a new poet. The apprentice's memory is manipulated by his master as if it were a writing draft in which the latter adds, suppresses, or intercalates words at his free will. These alien verses are imprinted on his mind forever, and his future production of poems will inevitably have a mimetic nature. This system can explain the invariability of themes in different trends of poetry as well as the endless repetition of the same metaphors and images.

The poems in the tales of *The Book* have, in general, a tone of exultation or lamentation for the separation of lovers. However, they do not fulfil a narrative function in terms of developing a plot. Situated between panegyrics and elegies, poems are above all pauses, the lengthening of plots, which are necessary to Shahrazad's strategy, for they introduce a new cadence and beat to the narrative.

The Book alternates between prose and poetry. We can argue that the genres are used indistinctly. This is attested by the presence of a rhymed prose, a distinctive feature of Arabic literature. Jamil Haddad (1961) states that this specific feature of Oriental literature, in which prose borders those domains attributed to poetry by the Western world, showcases not only that poetry precedes prose, but also that the former existed as a lived reality in Oriental culture (1961, p.IX). Ultimately, this refers to the very constitution of the Arabic language, whose phonetics developed closely and intimately to music theory, causing the existence of common terms between both systems (KRISTEVA, 1983, p.154).

Rafael Cansinos Assens (1986), the translator of *The Book* into Spanish, also underscores the relevance of poetry to the Arabs and its spontaneous, *interjectional* nature. The transmission of almost all the pre-Islam poetic production, developed among Bedouins, occurred through a type of auditory waves, and the poems were compiled into anthologies only belatedly. Arabic poetry was only available in written

form in the 10th century, during sultan Harun Al-Rashid's time. However, it always maintained the character of a momentary, reactive creation.

The origin of rhymed prose is found in the *saj'*, which were magic formulas of wizards and diviners who lived on the right bank of the Euphrates. They were used to protect friends and harm enemies, a very common practice among Semitic peoples. *Qasidas*, whose echoes are heard in *The Book*, may have been developed from the *saj'* although they are a type of monorhymed poems. Single rhyme reached such a generic use among Arabic poets that a poem could be identified based on the consonant of the rhyme even when the same rhyme was used in other poems (VERNET, 1968, pp.12-13).

This type of composition is found in *The Book*, especially in erotic situations. This is shown in the excerpt below in which jocosity is evident and the mnemonic plays in not less explicit.

He baited the hook and lit the fuse. He threaded the needle, he cooked the eel, he let the valiant trumpet peel. His tongue said: 'Squeal!' his teeth said: 'Feel!' and his eyes said: 'Burn 'em up with zeal!' One hand bade kneel, one hand bade steal, and both of his lips cried: 'Give us veal!' The drilling steel said: 'Dance a reel beneath my quick descending wheel, O pearl in peal, O daughter leal, O jewel of the royal seal! Come, chirp and leap, my dainty!' And thus the citadel was ta'en, whose towers shall not be held again. The battle rolled upon the plain (that is to say, the counterpane) with banging but with little bane, with mighty wound but little pain, with piercing, but with no one slain, with lightning and with hurricane, with stain and strain of vein and brain; and yet the end of the campaign was neither's loss and either's gain. So 'Praise to Him,' be our refrain, 'Who makes the maiden ripe and fain and swells the muscles of the swain that, by the playing of these twain, the world may be fulfilled again!' (THE BOOK, 2005a, p.428).²⁶

In popular tales, the repetition of sounds, phrases or situations determine the functionality of the narrative. The rhythm is imposed not only by the rhyme, but also by events because "events can rhyme in prose narratives" (CALVINO, 2016, p.42).²⁷ The listeners of such narratives expect repetition, redundancy, and the details that have been known and retold the same way, using the same and well-worn formulas.

²⁶ For reference, see footnote 3.

²⁷ For reference, see footnote 13.

This may be the reason why Antoine Galland (1965), the translator of *The Book* into French, not knowing the function or the effect of narrative fixation done by repetition, omitted tales that he considered similar to others and that he believed uselessly lengthened the narrative.

More than mnemonics, enumeration, which is as old as the world (SPITZER, 1948),²⁸ is a form of knowledge that is connected to the systems of classification of Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Because of it, *The Book* could produce an inventory of ancient knowledge by compiling long catalogues of millenary knowledges that include from sacred utterances of the name of God to the most profane prescription books.

Shahrazad's memory resembles that of a person who not only weaves, but also collects remnants of long-forgotten tales and groups them in a new and surprising fashion. The idea of collection is present in *The Book* in variegated forms: in a nesting system of tales, in which a story always generates another, and in an extensive archive of Arabic poetry, which comprises of an anthology of poems that date back the pre-Islam era.

Besides this collection of prose and poetry, *The Book* brings long lists pertaining to a world that was minutely catalogued: banquet delicacies, luxurious outfits, fruits, spices, trays of perfume, details on woman's beauty and ugliness, and abundant epithets for the genitalia.

The origin of classification is the demand for order, but sometimes these catalogues produce the feeling of a small chaos in which every class of objects and beings is thrown into confusion. Leo Spitzer (1948) identifies this procedure in modern prose, tracing it back to Antiquity. He calls it "chaotic enumeration" (p.206).²⁹

The most remote source of enumeration is undoubtedly the *Bible*, which brings, among other things, extensive lists of names and attributes of God. In the *Book of Numbers* we can even find a far-reaching census of the tribes of Israel. Enumeration is also in Homer's renowned catalogue of ships in Book Two of *The Iliad*: among other things, all the Archaian and Trojan armies are named therein. According to Vernant (2006, p.118), "the whole passage accounts for about half of Book Two, about four

²⁸ SPITZER, L. *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1948.

²⁹ For reference, see footnote 28.

hundred lines in all.”³⁰ For him, these catalogues constitute the legendary archives registered in the memory “of a society that has no writing” (VERNANT, 2006, p.119).³¹

Even if spread out throughout the tales of *The Book*, some of the countless names of Allah are found. They multiply along the tales, beginning or ending narratives; they are also transformed according to the plot. Muslim belief, in its most fundamental formulation, declares that *there is only one God and that Mohammed is his Prophet*. Multiplying his name, however, does not lead to a break from monotheism; it only invokes his endless divine attributes. Some narratives are interrupted or their beginnings are long delayed because He is invoked – He, who is “the only one to remain Unchangeable or Unaltered,” “the one who lives without wasting away,” “the one who brings about changes upon changes,” and so on. However, it is when we call him Allah using different formulas that we silence his real name, a subject for injunction.

However, the use *par excellence* of “chaotic enumeration,” in its medieval context, is not surely found in the name of God, but of the devil. According to Leo Spitzer (1948),³² it is the diabolical chaos that multiplies enumerations as the devil’s traps cannot be enumerated; they are countless. Besides, pleasure is clearly located in the accumulation of vices and punishments.

It is in the marshy domain of demon arts that, in *The First Madman’s Tale*, an endless list in which the male organ receives 31 epithets is compiled:

I swear, O King of time, that my rascal earned his names of ram, smith, stunner, sweet calamity, long one, iron, weeper, workman, horner, rubber, old irresistible, staff, prodigious tool, pathfinder, blind fighter, young sword, great swimmer, nightingale, thick-neck father, father of nerves, him of the large eggs, old man with a turban, bald head, father of thrusts, father of delights, father of terrors, cock of the silence, daddy’s little one, the poor man’s wealth, old muscle of caprice, and mighty sugar-stick (THE BOOK, 2005a, p.59).³³

³⁰ For reference, see footnote 10.

³¹ For reference, see footnote 10.

³² For reference, see footnote 28.

³³ For reference, see footnote 3.

We cannot but notice the tone of litany in this long enumeration, which does not end before he guarantees that he gave “a separate example for each name and only made an end in time for the morning prayer” (THE BOOK, 2005a, p.59).^{34 35}

However, due to a subtle articulation between the sacred and the profane, we are led to believe that, besides the name of Allah and despite the long list (31 names), *something was still unsaid*. In effect, such an unexpected repertoire starts with the expression “that of which you know,”³⁶ viz., that whose name we dare not say. However, in popular Arabic it is known and called in different tales in *The Book* by the short name *zebb*.

Writing about the issue of the interdiction of language related to sexuality, Nancy Huston (1980) suggests that “the choice of (euphemistic and derogatory) words for the sex organ is significant because of the meanings that are included and excluded” (p.47).³⁷ In this type of enumeration, what is sought is the pleasure of the play, the exchange, the language that is renewed when the topic is addressed in an unexpected and humorous way. The effort to be precise is unnecessary. Disguising the *very* word allows the person to pretend that he/she is saying something totally different and that the long chain of signifiers of which the enumeration is constituted does reach their concepts (the signified).³⁸ The polysemic effect ensures that the ultimate signification is the unsaid, located beyond language: no matter how much is said about it, still nothing is said.

According to Calvino (1971), movement in literature is produced when saying what is unknown is really sought and words are effortfully combined in continually new forms. This is why literature is created “at the extreme boundaries of the sayable” (CALVINO, 1971, p.76).³⁹

³⁴ For reference, see footnote 3.

³⁵ TN. In the Portuguese version, the excerpt is longer: “naquela noite, ó meu senhor o sultão, cada apelido foi acompanhado de sua explicação, cada virtude de sua prova, e cada atributo de sua demonstração” [at that night, oh my sultan, every epithet was followed by an explanation, every virtue by a proof, and every feature by a demonstration].

³⁶ TN. In the Portuguese version, the translator uses the expression “that of which you know,” which is more subtle than the English translation “my rascal.”

³⁷ Text in Portuguese: “a escolha de termos (eufemísticos ou pejorativos) para os órgãos sexuais é significativa tanto pelo que inclui quanto pelo que exclui.”

³⁸ On the topic, see Severo Sarduy (1972, pp.167-184).

³⁹ Text in Portuguese: “borda extrema do dizível.”

If words do not say everything, we can only but play with them. The art of enumeration is therefore a play of language. Words follow one another, refer to one another, are reordered and establish a sequence that cannot be broken. In the narratives of *The Book* only sometimes is enumeration altered, suspended, but it returns and its rhythm is resumed. The plot is not fundamental, for words seem to be their own end, in their richness and endless enunciation one after the other. Sometimes they induce olfactory memory as perfumes are named:

All would be most bounteously complete with a little incense, some benzoin, a few scents for burning, a touch of rose-water and orange-water to sprinkle my guests withal.' In desperation I had a little chest brought, containing more than fifty golden dīnārs' worth of ambergris, aloewood, nard, musk, incense and benzoin, and had it packed up for him with aromatic essences and silver water-sprays (THE BOOK, 2004, pp.224-225).⁴⁰

Or they Proustianly remember:

[...] openwork sugar tarts with butter, velvet pastries perfumed with musk and stuffed deliciously, s̄abūnīyah biscuits, small cakes, lime tarts, honey-tasting jam, those sweets called mushabbak, little souffléd patties called lukaimātal-Kādī, and those others named combs of Zainab which are made with butter and mingled with milk and honey (THE BOOK, 2004, pp.50-51).⁴¹

The pleasure of enumerating is what can never be taken away. Before enjoying the banquet to which he was invited, he kindly asks, ““Allāh smother you with gifts, my master, and make each generous act of yours come home as a blessing to you. Tell me a little, sweet master, about the things with which you are about to overwhelm me, for I confess that I would like to know”” (THE BOOK, 2004, p.224).⁴² As foods are named, they are slowly savored through every single word. This obsession for inventories is taken to an extreme in *The Tale of Shakkāshik*, the Barber's Sixth Brother: an imaginary banquet is narrated in exhaustive details (THE BOOK, 2004, pp.261-262).⁴³

⁴⁰ THE Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night: Volume I. Translated by Powys Mathers. London; New York: Routledge, 2004.

⁴¹ For reference, see footnote 40.

⁴² For reference, see footnote 40.

⁴³ For reference, see footnote 40.

The *bazaar style*, according to Spitzer (1948), is present in every enumeration, as if it were “a child who was skimming through the catalogue of a great store and annotating in a disorderly fashion the articles that, by chance, came under his gaze” (p.258).⁴⁴ The poet sees in this catalogue not a long list of flat words, but potentiality for poetry. In *The Book* the image of the bazaar is more than a metaphor. In fact, in almost every tale there is a *souk* (an Arabic marketplace), in which enumeration is always mandatory. Goods are portrayed voluptuously in their richness and diversity, be them silk fabrics, brocades, rugs, foods, or jewels. If we go to the fruit stall in the souk, as in *The Tale of the Porter and the Young Girls*, we can buy, among other things,

[...] Syrian apples, Osmāni quinces, peaches from Uman, jasmine of Aleppo, Damascene nenuphars, cucumbers from the Nile, limes from Egypt, Sultānī citrons, myrtle berries, flowers of henna, bloodred anemones, violets, pomegranate bloom, and the narcissus (THE BOOK, 2004, p.50).⁴⁵

What is important here is the variety of names that these goods suggest, which allows us to use different name combinations.

Whether in contemporary or ancient literature, the search for this effect is confined to the concept of literature as an encyclopedia, a method of knowledge and especially a link between facts, people, and things. Calvino states that this type of work has a modular, accumulative and combinatory structure. Each new object in the narrative plane multiplies its relations indefinitely in a network of connections that can only be developed through memory. The weaving of the narrative threads is also done by “exploiting the semantic potential of words, of all the varieties of verbal and syntactical forms with their connotations and tones” (CALVINO, 2016, p.132).⁴⁶ Willing to encompass everything, this type of work includes not only catalogues and banquet menus, but also unprecedented prescriptions, which become more strikingly vivid on the love plane. With a distinctive air of almanac, the prescription below aims to cure love wounds.

⁴⁴ For reference, see footnote 28.

⁴⁵ For reference, see footnote 40.

⁴⁶ For reference, see footnote 13.

In the name of Allah, the supreme Doctor—take three measures of her pure presence into which has been stirred a grain of prudence, three measures of union clarified with a pinch of absence, two weights of clear affection studiously free from wormwood, a heaped measure of incense of kisses high and low, a hundred kisses of the pomegranates, of which fifty shall be lip-sweetened, thirty pigeon-fashion, and twenty after the manner of little birds, two measures of Aleppo subtlety and sighs of Irak, two ounces of tongue-ends worked diligently both in and out, three drachms of right Egyptian and pure white fat, boiled in love water and syrup of desire over the fire of pleasure: pour the mixture into a soft couch and quickly add two ounces of the water of her mouth. Take fasting for three days; on the fourth at noon eat a slice of the melon of desire, flavoured with lemon and white almond milk to taste, and wash down with three measures of good thigh work. Then enter the bath swiftly and deeply, for the health's sake. And may it be a cure to you! (THE BOOK, 2005a, pp.244-245).⁴⁷

However, not everything is milk and honey in the Kingdom of the *Thousand Nights and One Night*. There are some spicier mixtures that use uncommon spices, such as the “sovereign mixture which will harden the eggs and thicken the sap when it has become too thin” (THE BOOK, 2005c, p.96).⁴⁸ The creator of such an exquisite delicacy

[...] took two ounces of Chinese cubebs, one ounce of fat extract of Ionian hemp, one ounce of fresh cloves, one ounce of red cinnamon from Sarandib, ten drachms of white Malabar cardamoms, five of Indian ginger, five of white pepper, five of pimento from the isles, one ounce of the berries of Indian star-anise, and half an ounce of mountain thyme. These he mixed cunningly, after having pounded and sieved them; he added pure honey until the whole became a thick paste; then he mingled five grains of musk and an ounce of pounded fish roe with the rest. Finally he added a little concentrated rose-water and put all in the bowl (THE BOOK, 2005c, p.96).⁴⁹

The, he discloses fascinating details on how to use it:

‘You must eat this paste two hours before the sexual approach; but, for three days before that, you must eat nothing save roast pigeons excessively seasoned with spice, male fish with their cream complete,

⁴⁷ For reference, see footnote 3.

⁴⁸ THE Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night: Volume II. Translated by Powys Mathers. London; New York: Routledge, 2005c.

⁴⁹ For reference, see footnote 48.

and lightly fried rams' eggs. If, after all that, you do not pierce the very walls of the room [...] (THE BOOK, 2005c, p. 96).⁵⁰

Another form of knowledge in *The Book* can refer to what Curtius (2013) calls “numerical composition” (p.501),⁵¹ which attests to the existence of “arithmetical systems which are rooted in archaic thought-forms” (CURTIUS, 2013, p.503).⁵² In *The Book* numbers not only carry an unquestionable mystical and symbolic meaning, but they also favor and accelerate the narrator's remembrance, thus determining cadence. This way, Sindbad embarks on seven voyages through the seven seas and docks on seven islands. Seven is also the number of gowns Princess Dunyazade has. Three is the number of wishes in the night of power, the number of madmen and Sudanese Eunuchs. Six is the number of the barber's brothers. There are five keys of destiny, forty thieves, ninety-nine severed heads and a thousand and one nights, showing every imaginable kabbalistic combination.

Throughout *The Book* the rhythmic forms taken on by memory are certainly playful. Huizinga (1949) points out that in Semitic languages “the semantic field of play [...] is dominated by the root *la'ab*,” which “also means laughing and mocking. The Arabic *la'iba* covers playing in general, making mock of, and teasing” (p.35).⁵³

For us to explore the rhythms – or language plays – of *The Book*, we would have to analyze the whole collection. For us to listen to its entire rhythm, we would have to rewrite it. Renouncing the fate of copyist, we acknowledge it is impossible for us to arrive at a conclusion.

3 The Castles of Memory

In his short essay on *The Book*, Borges (1984) frequently explores architecture metaphors. For him, the *Nights* are “cathedrals, miscalled Gothic,” that were built by

⁵⁰ For reference, see footnote 48.

⁵¹ For reference, see footnote 6.

⁵² For reference, see footnote 6.

⁵³ HUIZINGA, J. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London; Boston; Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949.

thousands of men through generations. He states that “none of them knew that he was helping to construct this illustrious book” (p.48).⁵⁴

The image of construction used to describe *The Book* is notably appropriate because for us to enter this kingdom, we need to go through countless fictional castles, whose exquisite architecture represents memory’s last refuge. For narration to proceed, memory spatializes and seeks imaginary places.

It is in the image of palaces – these huge allegorical constructions that Haddad (1961) interprets as Edenic metaphors – that the imaginary place finds its most significant expression. Now we shall randomly find some of these descriptions in *The Book’s* tales.

In order to visit a city in *The Book*, we need at first to take a long trip through flat and unpeopled lands. Our sole objective is to find odd objects, such as “old copper jars filled with strange black smoke in devilish forms” (THE BOOK, 2005c, p.287).⁵⁵ After a few years of travel, we see a palace “highwalled with Chinese steel.” The dome of this palace is of lead and serves “as a resting place for countless crows” (THE BOOK, 2005c, p.289).⁵⁶ At the entrance, there is a tower about whose foot are “clustered four circles of a hundred sepulchres,” surrounded by “a bright crystal tomb,” where a mysterious inscription is graved, “the letters filled with gold and diversified by precious stones” (THE BOOK, 2005c, p.290).⁵⁷ As we go into the tower through a double door of ebony, we begin to “move through the vast halls, filled with emptiness and silence.” We come then to a room “furnished alone of all” (THE BOOK, 2005c, p.292).⁵⁸ After we see a table at which a thousand kings sat, we open the first door from the hundred doors that we see.

Sometimes the ceremony of door opening demands the utterance of enchanted words. Certainly, however, they will guide us to new worlds – worlds that are carefully and precisely described. We will listen to the protagonist of Tale of the Third Kalandar, who has the keys to all the doors of the palace he is visiting:

⁵⁴ For reference, see footnote 2.

⁵⁵ For reference, see footnote 48.

⁵⁶ For reference, see footnote 48.

⁵⁷ For reference, see footnote 48.

⁵⁸ For reference, see footnote 48.

I went through its great gate which was all of gold, and found that there were about it ninety nine aloe and sandal wood doors, and that the doors of all the halls of the palace were of ebony inlaid with gold and diamonds. Each led to halls and gardens in which I caught glimpses of the massed treasures of earth and sea (THE BOOK, 2004, pp.97-98).

When I had finished, I gave thanks to Allāh, and made my way to the second door, opened it, and at once the senses of my eyes and nose were charmed by a multitude of flowers, filling a great garden and refreshed by little streams. [...] I thanked Allāh for his goodness and went to the third door. No sooner had I opened it than my ears were ravished with the notes of coloured birds, every kind that there is upon the earth. They were held in a vast cage made from aloe and sandal wood rods. The water for their drinking was held in little saucers, some of jade and some of delicately-tinted jasper. The seed for them to eat lay in little gold cups, the floor of the cage was sanded and sprinkled (THE BOOK, 2004, pp.99-100).⁵⁹

The fourth door gives way to dizziness, to the maze: there is a new construction with some other forty doors. Everything starts again.

In the middle of a great court I saw a pavilion with porphyry staircases, each leading up to one of forty ebony doors inlaid with gold and silver. These doors stood open, each showing a spacious hall within, holding a different treasure worth more than all the value of my kingdom. The first held [...] (THE BOOK, 2004, pp.99-100).⁶⁰

And then he opens door after door. When he opens the last door, the one forbidden, he certainly pays a high price for breaking the rule.

Although these imaginary constructions produce the immediate effect of lengthening the narrative, it is ancient mnemonics that gives them their precise significance.

Developed in the East and the West, the genesis of mnemonics is classical Antiquity. According to Yeats (1999), in Cicero's *De oratore* (the work that places memory as one of the five parts of rhetoric), Simonides of Ceos (c. 556–468 BC) “invented the art of memory” (p.2).⁶¹ Besides *De oratore*, other sources of Latin tradition on mnemonics are *Ad Herennium* (of unknown authorship, but also attributed

⁵⁹ For reference, see footnote 40.

⁶⁰ For reference, see footnote 40.

⁶¹ YEATS, F. *The Art of Memory*. London; New York: Routledge, 1999.

to Cicero), which was well known in the Middle Ages, and Quintilian's *Inuitutio oratorio*.

The method that makes it possible for the orator to imprint precision to the narrative employs architectonic procedures as a means to train memory. In order to do so, we just need to mentally build a spacious construction whose details are well thought out, just as it happens in the palaces portrayed in *The Book*: from the patio to the atrium, from the hall to the chambers, until a minutely habitable world is created. The chosen images and places are projected into the memory and imprinted on it. They become a type of internal alphabet that can be retrieved at any given moment. As we visit this reservoir in our imagination, we can read the stored material, following its exact order and sequence. For that to happen, though, the imagined places need to comprise a series so that we can freely move in all directions from place to place.

Both Cicero and Quintilian established with precision the effective method in the art of memory. Places must be bright and spacious – safety must be ensured. They must be at moderate intervals apart and there must be “images which are active, which are sharply denned, unusual, and which have the power of speedily encountering and penetrating the mind” (YEATS, 1999, p.23).⁶² This type of memory stored in places and images allows us to consult it as if it were a real archive, and the *loci* maintain the order of the narrative material as if it were a written system. According to Quintilian's instructions, “[t]he first notion is placed, as it were, in the forecourt; the second, let us say, in the atrium; the remainder are placed in order all round the *impluvium*, and committed not only to bedrooms and parlours, but even to statues and the like” (YEATS, 1999, p.22).⁶³ The method used for a Roman house or a palace can also be used to retrieve from memory a whole city.

For Spence (1984),⁶⁴ the Italian Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci was the one who helped to disseminate the architecture of memory by building imaginary castles. In 1596 the priest wrote in Chinese the *Treatise on Mnemonic Arts*. According to him, memory castles can be drawn from reality, fantasy or a hybrid construction, such as an open imaginary door in a real building that gives access to new spaces. Ricci's method is based on the aforementioned Latin authors and uses the analogy with writing:

⁶² For reference, see footnote 61.

⁶³ For reference, see footnote 61.

⁶⁴ SPENCE, J. *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984.

Once your places are all fixed in order, you can walk through the door and make your start. Turn to the right and proceed from there. As with the practice of calligraphy, in which you move from the beginning to the end, as with fish who swim around in ordered schools, so is everything arranged in your brain, and all the images are ready for whatever you seek to remember (RICCI *apud* SPENCE, 1984, p.9).⁶⁵

From the construction of chambers, which can always be bigger and in greater numbers, we can add more images. However, we need to be careful not to cram the space.

Needless to say, *The Book* does not follow Ricci's instruction on the parsimonious use of decoration and objects: "small decorative objects of gold or jade upon occasional tables" (SPENCE, 1984, pp.10-11).⁶⁶ Excess prevails. When we walk through a castle in *The Book*, even the corridor is lined with tapestries along its full length, its ceilings hung with colored lamps and many chandeliers. The walls are "covered with gold and silver trophies, with jewel work and warlike arms." As we go along the corridor, we come into a hall "furnished with such splendor that it is useless to try to tell you of it" (THE BOOK, 2004, pp.112-113).⁶⁷

Nevertheless, that did not stop Amīnah from describing it: "In its midst, all spread about with silk stuffs on the floor, stood a bed of alabaster, crusted with monstrous pearls and jewels of great price, and having a satin quilt thrown over it" (THE BOOK, 2004, p.113).⁶⁸

In the tales, the places in which memory finds refuge follows a strategy that is easily identified in the mnemonic models we have described. The art of memory is a training method, a technique that requires elaboration and rigorous mental discipline. However, it is imagination that mobilizes it.

An image, among others, remains vivid and recurrent: that of the traveler who, caught unawares by the night, is welcomed into a house because of the sacred duty of hospitality. His host asks, "have you not some good tale of marvellous adventure in your scrips to amuse us?" (THE BOOK, 2004, p.57).⁶⁹ The content is the genuine power of image. Memory spaces are inhabited by images that move around, are mixed,

⁶⁵ For reference, see footnote 64.

⁶⁶ For reference, see footnote 64.

⁶⁷ For reference, see footnote 40.

⁶⁸ For reference, see footnote 40.

⁶⁹ For reference, see footnote 40.

repeated and endlessly create other images. To use Bachelard's (1994)⁷⁰ tautology, they are *imagined images* produced by an *imaginative imagination*. Images can only be *understood* through other images. Interpreting them means betraying them, moving them to a context other than that of the poetic imagination.

However, starting from 1704, for the tales of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night* – now printed in books and translated by Antoine Galland (1965) – to enter the Palace of Versailles, they were stripped of traces and images of memory: Galland omitted the poems because they were obscure, the rhymed prose because it was obscene, and the long enumerations because they were excessive.

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⁷⁰ BACHELARD, G. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated from the French by Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

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