



*UNICORNS IN THE GARDEN OF REASON:
The Mode of the List in Literature*

Bernardo Marin Diniz Aires Ferreira

Orientadores: Professora Doutora Helena Etelvina de Lemos Carvalhão Buescu

Professor Doutor Jan Baetens

Tese especialmente elaborada para obtenção do grau de Doutor no ramo de Estudos de Literatura e
de Cultura, na especialidade de Estudos Comparatistas.

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Abstract

This thesis provides a new analysis of the mode of the list in literature, offering a general theory of the list as well as studies of the following works: *The Pillow Book*, by Sei Shōnagon; *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, by Thomas Browne; *Moby-Dick*, by Herman Melville; *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, by Gustave Flaubert; and *Invisible Cities*, by Italo Calvino. Resting on the assumption that the list is not a mere literary device but, like narrative, a mode of understanding, the following study departs from the theory of cultural techniques in order to further two goals: to propose a new and broader definition of the notion of ‘list’ as a technique of counting, circumscribing, and naming, as well as establishing the possibility of analysing whole texts as lists, and not merely as texts which contain lists.

Keywords: list, cultural technique, enumeration, catalogue.

Abstract

A presente tese apresenta uma nova análise do modo da lista na literatura, oferecendo uma teoria geral da lista, bem como estudos das seguintes obras: *The Pillow Book*, de Sei Shōnagon; *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, de Thomas Browne; *Moby-Dick*, de Herman Melville; *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, de Gustave Flaubert; e *Invisible Cities*, de Italo Calvino. Partindo da premissa de que a lista não é apenas um artifício literário, mas, assim como a narrativa, um modo de compreensão, este estudo parte da teoria das técnicas culturais com vista a dois objetivos: propor uma nova e mais abrangente definição da noção de ‘lista’ como uma técnica de contagem, circunscrição e nomeação, e estabelecer a possibilidade de analisar textos inteiros como listas, e não apenas como textos que contêm listas.

Palavras-chave: lista, técnica cultural, enumeração, catálogo.

Primary Sources

The works which constitute the corpus of the thesis are abbreviated in the manner noted below.

References to the texts pertain to these editions unless otherwise noted.

<i>Bouvard</i>	Gustave Flaubert. “Bouvard et Pécuchet.” <i>Oeuvres</i> . Vol 2. Paris: Gallimard, 1952, pp. 201-301.
<i>Invisible Cities</i>	Italo Calvino. <i>Invisible Cities</i> . London: Vintage Books, 1997.
<i>Moby-Dick</i>	Herman Melville. <i>Moby-Dick or; the Whale</i> . London: Penguin Books, 2003.
<i>Pseudodoxia</i>	Thomas Browne. “Pseudodoxia Epidemica.” <i>The works of Sir Thomas Browne</i> . Vol. 2. Geoffrey Keynes (ed.). London: Faber & Faber, 1964.
<i>The Pillow Book</i>	Sei Shōnagon. <i>The Pillow Book</i> . London: Penguin Books, 2006.

Correspondence

References to letters are abbreviated to the following format: “Letter to [recipient]. [date].” Unless otherwise noted, the authors’ correspondence refers to the following sources.

Thomas Browne	Thomas Browne. <i>The works of Sir Thomas Browne</i> . Vol. 4. Geoffrey Keynes (ed.). London: Faber & Faber, 1964.
Gustave Flaubert	Yvan Leclerc, Danielle Girard. <i>Édition électronique de la correspondance de Flaubert</i> . Université de Rouen Normandie, 2017. <flaubert-v1.univ-rouen.fr/correspondance/edition/>.

Finally, the works of Thomas Browne are abbreviated and reference Keynes’ edition, unless otherwise noted. Thus, *Religio Medici* refers to the first volume of this edition, where the text is found, for example.

Table of Contents

Introduction	14
I. Listing as Counting	44
What is Counting?	44
Writing Economically	49
The List as Digression from Literature and Life	53
I.1. The Wanderer and the Carriage: Politics and Digressions in two Inventories	56
Spirit of the Bazar: Defining the Inventory	56
Lost and Found: Historical and Cultural Contexts	59
Thomas Browne's "Hopefull Dominion of Truth"	61
Sei Shōnagon's "Old Days"	65
The Body Comes Upon The List	69
A Paradox, Semiophores, and Deauthoralisation	82
A Political Rhetoric of Digression	95
I.2. Friendship, Finance, Flaubert: The Double-List and the Double-Protagonist	112
Double-Entry Dilettantes	113
<i>Bouvard et Pécuchet à la Swift</i>	123
<i>Accrochés par des Fibres Ennuyeuses</i>	132
I.3. Curious Sights and Heavy Crowns: Lists of Melancholy and Curiosity	146
Itineraries and Travelogues: Preliminary Definitions	147
Saturnine Travellers: Melancholy as Motivation, as List	154
The Curious, Their Curios, and The (mis)Prescription of Travelling	169
The List as Tree, and the List-maker as its Woodworm	189

II. Listing as Circumscribing	206
To Enter the Lists: Etymology, Play, and Horizons	207
A Letter From the Provinces	217
Faint Lights in the Distance	225
A Star-bellied Tambourine	233
The Round of Knowledge	246
<i>Le but de tout cela</i>	254
III. Listing as Naming	268
The Name as Taboo	268
<i>Okashi</i> and Attention	274
Friendship and Repetition	284
The Phantom and the Other	295
Truth and Generation	306
Venice and Taboo	319
IV. Two Concluding Remarks	330
An Invitation to Dance	330
A Laboratory of Metaphors	339
Appendix: The Pragmatic and the Poetic List	348
Works Cited	356

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In the intervals trying resolutely not to think – instead I made lists.

— F. Scott Fitzgerald

Introduction

Chancing on a volume by the late George Steiner titled *My Unwritten Books*, I found the following quote – an attempt to imaginatively define a genre or object of study:

[*Science and Civilisation in China*] belongs to a more special genre. One that has not, so far as I can tell, been properly identified, let alone elucidated.

This genre dates back to Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), if not earlier. It is a baroque species, a hybrid of minute erudition, arcane learning, esoteric citation and almost anarchic fantasmagoria. Pedantry runs riot. But so does the allegoric, the emblematic, the stuff of dreams. The relevant texts share distinctive markers. They are polyglot, brimful of lists, catalogues, taxonomies. Learning – this is the key – is so detailed, so compacted, that it becomes autonomous. It breeds elaborations, edifices far in excess of its immediate topic. It blends the technical fact with visionary possibility. Scholarship is so passionate, so 'autistic', as to create monsters, both merry and menacing. Arcadias and nightmares are lit under the microscope. (...) I would have liked to explore further this genre, to locate *Science and Civilisation in China* among these unicorns in the garden of reason.¹

Steiner's denomination refers to Joseph Needham's monumental study of Chinese culture and philosophy but he is quick to offer other examples: besides Burton, there is Vladimir Nabokov's translation of Alexander Pushkin's *Onegin* and A. E. Housman's annotated translation of Marcus Manilius' *Astronomicon*, as well as a reference to Jorge Luis Borges' fascination with the imaginative possibilities of such "unicorns" (even if he never wrote one himself). As the title of this thesis evinces, we borrow Steiner's fortunate expression to attempt to define for ourselves a category of texts to which, besides his examples, we add the works composing our *corpus*: *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shōnagon, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* by Thomas Browne, *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* by Gustave Flaubert, and *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino. Underlining the similarities between Steiner's description and our own observations, we propose to

¹ George Steiner. "Chinoiserie." *My Unwritten Books*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2008, pp. 28-30.

identify, analyse, and elucidate this group of texts under the sign of *the list*. It is one of the qualities of the list that it lends meaning by the mere fact of juxtaposition, groupings that are as suggestive as they are unexpected. I could not pass over the opportunity to give this thesis a title worthy of this effect, taken precisely from a fortuitous encounter during a mindless walkabout inside my university's library – one of the truest ways to experience the dizzying variety of lists in real life.

The list is a “unicorn in the garden of reason” in more ways than one. It is often regarded as the ‘unreasonable other’ of literature and, more precisely, of narrative: an intruder without autonomy, *ancilla narrationis*, at home in delirious speech and ‘chaotic’ registers, between “the stuff of dreams” and autism, vision or technique. We take note that the mystic can write endless lists in ways approaching babbling all while the horrors of nazism had relied on the techniques and operations of the list – in both cases, the list seems to excuse itself from those dimensions which we could term ‘human’. Moreover, to come across a list in the text is also like finding a unicorn: it has almost become a tradition of the analysis of lists to open the discussion by referencing the effect of estrangement they cause and their seemingly irreconcilable contrast with their context. “L’apparition d’une liste dans un texte littéraire a toujours de quoi surprendre,” write Raymond Michel, Sophie Milcent-Lawson, and Michelle Lecolle in the introduction to the collection *Liste et effet liste en littérature*.² This surprise might even extend to the methodological and disciplinary guidelines used to consider it as an object of study in the first place: “to dedicate a book to the topic of the list,” apologetically notes Lucie Doležalová, “may seem a bit obscure.”³ Brigitte L. Sandquist (on some catalogues in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*) draws a curious parallel:

The catalogues are seen as either rhetorical inflation or as blocks in the narrative economy, easily detachable units, non-narrative logjams in the progress of the “real

² Raymond Michel, Sophie Milent-Lawson, Michelle Lecolle. “Introduction.” *Liste et effet liste en littérature*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013, p. 7.

³ Lucie Doležalová. *The Charm of a List: From the Sumerians to Computerised Data Processing*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, p. 1.

story.” Indeed, it seems almost a function of the catalogues themselves (which contain so much untheorized residue) that they go untheorized in the criticism.⁴

The list, it would seem, shocks the textual and psychological dimensions of reception, the historical and cultural *milieu* upon which it appears, and even our ability to talk about it in critical and technical terms. As Bernard Sève rightly summarises, how to even *think* such a project?⁵ “It is,” Liam Cole Young rejoins, “hard to pin down.”⁶

Regardless, the time is as good as ever to tackle the list – it is, as Gaspard Turin wrote in 2013, “à la mode.”⁷ Academic inquiry into the list has only recently flourished with the degree of self-consciousness and self-reference which constitutes a proper ‘field’ and, while we will not provide an extensive account of the development of ‘list studies’ here, any short description should be prefaced by two observations. On the one hand, despite lists having been an intermittent source of academic interest for almost a century, they have only truly exploded into academic consciousness after Umberto Eco’s 2009 publication *The Infinity of Lists*;⁸ this despite Eco’s not being the first anthology of lists (that title would go to Francis Spufford’s *The Chatto Book of Cabbages and Kings*⁹) nor the first academic regard over this phenomenon. On the other hand, while Eco’s book does contain a number of thought-provoking proposals (such as the possible transmedial nature of lists), it largely ignores the vast body of works which preceded it.

These two factors have resulted in a strange double-state for the field of list studies: while recent analyses tend to quote Eco as ‘proof’ of the contemporary pertinence of a novel object of study, this weight on the academic imagination has not managed to contribute to a summarising view of the disparate bibliography and ‘schools’ which have largely guided the study of lists. This

⁴ Brigitte L. Sandquist. “The Tree Wedding in ‘Cyclops’ and the Ramifications of Cata-logic.” *James Joyce Quarterly* 33.2 (1996), p. 195.

⁵ Bernard Sève. *De haut en bas: philosophie des listes*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2010, p. 8.

⁶ Liam Cole Young. *List Cultures: Knowledge and Poetics from Mesopotamia to Buzzfeed*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017, p. 16.

⁷ Gaspard Turin. “Actualité de la liste.” *Acta Fabula* 14.4 (2013). Web.

⁸ Umberto Eco. *The Infinity of Lists*. New York: Rizzoli, 2009.

⁹ Francis Spufford. *The Chatto Book of Cabbages and Kings*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1989.

might be why Mesopotamia scholar Marc Van de Mieroop claims that Jack Goody was “the first modern scholar who paid attention to lists” – a statement which only reveals that Goody’s analysis, published in 1977, can be more easily inscribed into Mieroop’s own intellectual tradition (Mesopotamian and Sumerian studies), while Maurice Laugaa’s 1978 “Le Récit de La Liste” or Leo Spitzer’s 1945 *La Enumeración Caótica en la Poesía Moderna*, for example, cannot.

We might characterise the ensuing estrangement of ‘list-studies’ – offering a brief account of this historical development – as being divided into four major categories (apologising in advance for the necessary simplification), all of which have provided important insights to this work:

1) The principally German tradition of Sumerian and Mesopotamian *Listenwissenschaft* (list-science) and its influence in other anthropology-centred analyses as well as the equally German-born field of Media Philosophy after Friedrich Kittler, which focuses on media archaeology and the notion of cultural technique, with Liam Cole Young’s *List Cultures: Knowledge and Poetics from Mesopotamia to Buzzfeed* being the principal representative. It is to German assyriologist and sumerologist Wolfram Von Soden whom it is owed credit for the first academic study of the list, to be found in his 1936 article “Leistung und Grenze Sumerischer und Babylonischer Wissenschaft.”¹⁰ Racist and fascist overtones populate the work and theories of Von Soden. Yet, what he derided as an inferior mode of thought particular to the lesser texts of Babylonian traditions (barring them from being proper science and philosophy¹¹) was largely taken up by scholars, after the foundational work of Jack Goody,¹² as a tendency to analyse precisely these modes of thought not as inferior but simply ‘other’. In arguing, for

¹⁰ Wolfram Von Soden. “Leistung und Grenze Sumerischer und Babylonischer Wissenschaft.” *Die Welt als Geschichte* 2 (1936), pp. 411-64, 509-57.

¹¹ See, for a brief account of Von Soden’s work and its “negative connotations” Markus Hilgert. “Von ‘Listenwissenschaft’ und ‘Epistemischen Dingen’: Konzeptuelle Annäherungen an Altorientalische Wissensspraktiken.” *Journal for General Philosophy of Science* 40 (2009), pp. 277-309.

¹² “These written forms were not simply by-products of the interaction between writing and, say, the economy, filling some hitherto hidden ‘need’, but (...) they represented a significant change not only in the nature of transactions, but also in the ‘modes of thought’ that accompanied them (...) in terms of the formal, cognitive and linguistic operations which this new technology opened up.” Jack Goody. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 81.

example, as does Nicolas Christiaan Veldhuis, that “the intellectual commitment precedes the lists and explains them,” not only does the scholar of Mesopotamian studies go further than Goody’s proposal (which depended largely on considering “the cognitive challenge raised by reducing a list to writing”) and begins to study *listing* rather than lists, but lays down the groundwork for the similar sensibilities of the media analysis of, among others, Liam Cole Young,¹³ whose work begins precisely by an analysis of Mesopotamian lists and the development of *Listenwissenschaft* and whose significance for the present work is further detailed below;

2) In stark contrast with the previous case, the French school of textual analysis and critique, which, with remarkable productivity, has largely continued the work of Philippe Hamon on description, can be generally characterised by an adherence to textuality, a focus on the self-referential capabilities of the written text, and an unwillingness to venture into the intermedial clues of Eco or the epistemological and ontological doubts of media philosophy. Like media studies, the main figures of this school owe a great deal to the work of Goody but have split the genealogical branch in two by focusing not on “modes of thought” but on what Sève calls “le pouvoir séparateur de l’écriture,” in a section of his work titled “les listes sont produites par des opérations essentiellement graphiques,”¹⁴ or on the difference between words and things in the section “une liste ne contient pas que des mots ou des items assimilables à des mots.”¹⁵ Drawing from Goody, the French approach after Sève owes much to the spirit of the orality-literacy debates of his contemporaries (Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, etc.), perhaps more than to Goody himself. The natural conclusion arrives in the form of two essential premises: there is no list before writing, and the list is writing at its most self-conscious. As mentioned before,

¹³ Nicolas Christiaan Veldhuis. *Elementary Education at Nippur: The Lists of Trees and Wooden Objects*. 1997. University of Groningen. PhD Dissertation. *The University of Groningen Research Portal*. <research.rug.nl/en/publications/elementary-education-at-nippur-the-lists-of-trees-and-wooden-obje>, p. 141.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that Goody’s book is translated into French as *La Raison Graphique: La Domestication de la Pensée Sauvage*.

¹⁵ Bernard Sève. *Op. cit.*, pp. 23, 17.

Hamon's work on description (which also touches briefly on the topic of lists), namely, his focus on description as an innately metalinguistic and meta-reflexive practice, is often repurposed for analysing the list.¹⁶ In this light, it is hardly surprising that Hamon himself pens the preface to the 2013 collection *Liste et effet liste en littérature*, in which he proposes a roadmap for questions to be addressed by future research. Among these is a consideration of Eco's transmedial impulse, with the unfavourable sentiment that "les exemples et remarques d'Umberto Eco semblent moins convaincants."¹⁷ Beyond Sève and Hamon, the other main, and more recent, figure within the French context is surely to be Gaspard Turin, whose remarkable (and varied) work on the list makes up a large part of the intellectual foundation of the present thesis. In short, we can say that Turin sticks to the textualist, metalinguistic, and meta-reflexive principles;¹⁸

3) Postclassical Narratology, presents a curious phenomenon: without any major work devoted exclusively to the form of the list, any reference to a hypothetical 'school' within this field of research would be unfounded, were it not for the 2016 issue of the *Style* journal, entirely dedicated to the topic of lists and featuring such prominent figures of the area such as Monika Fludernik, Jan Alber, or Brian Richardson. Throughout most of the contributions, the position of the list can be defined in the postclassical narratological discourse by a willing subsumption under various theorisations of narrative, which always renders it, following Gérard Genette's work on description (whom Richardson quotes directly¹⁹), as non-autonomous *ancilla*

¹⁶ Philippe Hamon. *Du descriptif*. Paris: Hachette Livre, 1993, p. 38.

¹⁷ Philippe Hamon. "La Mise en liste." *Liste et effet liste en littérature*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013, p. 27.

¹⁸ On Eco's proposal: "On voit immédiatement ce que cette fausse rhétorique a d'irrecevable (...) L'approche n'est pas seulement épistémologiquement douteuse : elle finit par niveler les rapports hiérarchiques entre les objets observés et isolés, rapports qui fondent toute approche scientifique." (Gaspard Turin. *Op. cit.*) And a very interesting clarification from his doctoral dissertation: "L'effet de réel spécifique à la liste n'appelle pas de révélation, qui déboucherait sur une mise en valeur définitive de réel au détriment de la fiction (...). En somme, l'argument de réel peut être utilisé. Mais pas contre la fiction : par la fiction et par la littéraire. Il ne s'agit, pour l'utilisateur de la liste, de toucher à son référent, mais de renouveler par elle son expérience de la référentialité." (Gaspard Turin. *Entre Hybris et Mélancolie: poétique, esthétique et usages de la liste littéraire dans le roman français contemporain (1963-2013)*. 2014. Université de Lausanne. PhD Dissertation. *Serval: serveur académique lausannois* <serval.unil.ch/resource/serval:BIB_B3266248B812.P001/REF>, p. 185.)

¹⁹ Brian Richardson. "Modern Fiction, the Poetics of Lists, and the Boundaries of Narrative." *Style* 50.3 (2016), p. 339.

narrationis. This goal is explicitly tied to postclassical narratology's conception of narrative as, in the prescient words of David Lodge, an "omnivore" category which can assimilate "all kinds of nonfictional discourse (...) even lists."²⁰ We see various programmatic instances of this "transgeneric, transdisciplinary, and transmedial undertaking"²¹ in a variety of definitions and handbooks, most notably David Herman's 1999 definition of the term.²² Regarding the list, however, the effect is the opposite of this generous spirit: if the frontiers of narrative are only ever-expanding, the list is always analysed as narrative. In the issue of *Style*, and similarly to Richardson (who writes that "narrative seems to produce a kind of center of gravity that regularly promises to turn non-narrative elements into narratives themselves"²³), Fludernik classifies lists into four types only to conclude that the first three are "inherently part of narrative," while the latter "belongs to the text type or genre of the embedded text."²⁴ Alber's text provides another version of the same argument which, if not directly classifying lists as narratives, approaches the textualist principle, claiming that the most valuable expressive quality of lists is to serve as a meta-reflection on language itself, "draw[ing] attention to themselves as linguistic constructs."²⁵ For all these reasons, and despite the diametrically opposite developments of the previous two cases, the field of Postclassical Narratology invariably presents a clearer dead-end for a study of lists which does not mean to consign them to the position of *ancilla narrationis*;

4) If the three 'schools' sketched above comprise the most obviously concerted efforts to address the phenomenon of the list in literature, it would be a grave omission to pass over other

²⁰ David Lodge. *The Art of Fiction*. London: Penguin Books, 1992, p. 62.

²¹ Jan Alber, Monika Fludernik. "Introduction." *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2005, p. 21.

²² See David Herman. "Introduction." *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1999, pp. 2-3. See also, besides Alber and Fludernik's contribution above, Monika Fludernik, Greta Olson. "Introduction." *Current Trends in Narratology*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011, p. 3.

²³ Brian Richardson. *Loc. cit.*

²⁴ Monika Fludernik. "Descriptive Lists and List Descriptions." *Style* 50.3 (2016), p. 310.

²⁵ Jan Alber. "Absurd Catalogues: The Functions of Lists in Postmodern Fiction." *Style* 50.3 (2016), p. 355.

contributions, despite their being (by virtue of focusing on and being born out of specific authors, texts, geographical or historical contexts) sometimes more ‘insular’ than the groups described above. Unavoidable in this context is Leo Spitzer’s *La Enumeración Caótica en la Poesía Moderna*,²⁶ one of the earliest studies of the list as well as a common unfortunate oversight. Among many instructive observations, we might single out the tentative beginnings of a connection between the visual metaphors of the list and the postulation of a conceptual and imagined space particular to the list, a space which prises a stable observer in a de-perspectivised world. Other traditions have provided fertile ground for reflecting on lists. We have already mentioned the work of Lev Manovich (to which we will return), but there is also the work on American Transcendentalist poetry of Lawrence Buell and, more significantly, the more recent classic by Robert E. Belknap;²⁷ the tradition of classical catalogues, indebted to the landmark 1964 study by Charles Rowan Beye, in which Benjamin Sammons’ *The Art and Rhetoric of the Homeric Catalogue* should be singled out for its thought-provoking contributions to the subject of lists also in a general sense;²⁸ Elizabeth Jackson’s work on Old English and Old Icelandic poetry, particularly her brilliant connection between list forms and the political rhetoric of J. Maxwell Atkinson;²⁹ or the various instances of lists in ‘Chaucer

²⁶ Leo Spitzer. *La Enumeración Caótica en la Poesía Moderna*. Buenos Aires: Coni, 1945. Spitzer’s work also resulted in a particularly unfortunate heritage, namely, the close association between listing and the notion of “chaos,” of a vertiginous existential disenfranchisement. Another oft-missed text published in 1944, however, already argued for an opposite view of the list. See Detlev W. Schumann. “Observations on Enumerative Style in Modern German Poetry.” *PMLA* 59.4 (1944), p. 1111.

²⁷ Lawrence Buell. “Transcendentalist Catalogue Rhetoric: Vision Versus Form.” *American Literature* 40.3 (1968), pp. 325-39; “Catalogue Rhetoric.” *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1973, pp. 166-87; Robert E. Belknap. *The List: The Uses and Pleasures of Cataloguing*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004.

²⁸ Charles Rowan Beye. “Homeric Battle Narratives and Catalogues.” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 68 (1964), pp. 345-73; Benjamin Sammons. *The Art and Rhetoric of the Homeric Catalogue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. See also his chapter “Catalogues and Catalogic” in *Device and Composition in the Greek Epic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

²⁹ Elizabeth Jackson. “The Art of the List-Maker and the Grímnismal Catalogue.” *Arkiv for Nordisk Filologi* 110 (1995), pp. 5-39; “‘Not Simply Lists’: An Eddic Perspective on Short-Item Lists in Old-English Poems.” *Speculum* 73 (1998), pp. 338-71; J. Maxwell Atkinson. *Our Master’s Voices: The Language and Body Language of Politics*. London, Methuen, 1984.

studies', from which an invaluable article by Stephen A. Barney stands out.³⁰ We will not go into these texts here, as their important contributions to this thesis will quickly become apparent. Lastly, there is naturally an endless number of works on subjects whose relation to the list is obvious but which, in the absence of an explicit reference to the list, often pass unnoticed, such as for example, studies on the notion of variation.³¹ We will not list these here, but it is fair to say that wherever there are lists, they create that sense of confusion remarked upon earlier, they elicit academic approaches willing to explain them – we can only regretfully note when the absence of common parlance engenders the profusion of trivial repetitions and parochial misconceptions, and much could be illuminated by an attentive reading of the authors referenced here.

To summarise, any study of lists should not proceed further without engaging consciously with what has slowly become a robust body of work on the subject but, perhaps more importantly, without engaging with the intellectual and philosophical reasons which led to the rich variety of approaches in the first place. In this thesis, we aim to do precisely this, both in the sense of considering contributions from a variety of provenances as well as engaging and tackling the different questions and concerns spread throughout the literature – the mere existence of interpretative differences, in other words, should prompt deep reflection.

But the list has not only become the centre of attention within a scholarly context: looking outwards into the non-academic reality, it seems uncontroversial to propose that contemporary popular culture too is particularly attuned to the overbearing presence of – and infrastructural dependence on – a variety of incarnations of the list format: top 10 videos, Google search

³⁰ See Stephen A. Barney. "Chaucer's Lists". *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*. Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982, pp. 189-223. See also, for example, William J. Farrell. "Chaucer's Use of the Catalogue." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 5.1 (1963), pp. 64-78; Lara Ruffolo. "Literary Authority and the Lists of Chaucer's 'House of Fame': Destruction and Definition Through Proliferation." *The Chaucer Review* 27.4 (1993), pp. 325-41.

³¹ As Hélène Vial writes, "qui dit liste, en littérature, dit variation." Hélène Vial. "Introduction." *La Variatio: l'aventure d'un principe d'écriture, de l'antiquité au XXI siècle*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014, p. 13. See also Massin. *De la variation*. Paris: Gallimard, 2000.

suggestions, algorithmic playlists, image-boards, etc. Even in contemporary literature we would be tempted to ascribe a certain tendency to list or to imagine the list as an inevitable trend: “contre la sophistication des longues phrases proustiennes, qui garde la mémoire de l’architecture des périodes classiques, ce sont en effet des périodes défaites, mangées de listes, qui imposent leur allure incertaine, parfois bancale, à la prose contemporaine,”³² writes Christelle Reggiani. Lists may be everywhere and preclude everything. But are they a symptom or a palliative? John Durham Peters leans towards the latter:

We live, as the late Ken Cmiel argued, in a time of promiscuous knowledge, and the list is one strategy to cope with and make use of our temptations amid information abundance. The comically preposterous juxtapositions of lists repeatedly point to how the world escapes our concepts. There can also be a certain desperation in a list, an exasperation that the universe is so wide and our time is so short.³³

The list as a coping mechanism might, however, subvert our hopes, for even if deployed in “desperation,” the list, writes Katherine C. Little, can also be seen as the child of neoliberal and capitalistic strategies of disinformation and synonym with those same dehumanising practices.³⁴ It is symptom and disease.

It is perhaps wiser not to jump to conclusions. Just as the particular brand of the human condition articulated in Peters’ text is not itself particular to contemporary existence (the universe has always been wide and life always short), so is the list neither a product of modernity and its various technologies nor a particularly innovative reaction to abundance. The list was there since the beginning – the first texts known to us are lists. Peters himself disparages some of the more contemporizing approaches as shortsighted, on the grounds that they disregard both the history and uses of listing:

³² Christelle Reggiani. “Tendances stylistiques de la prose littéraire contemporaine.” *Poétique* 192 (2022), p. 121.

³³ John Durham Peters. *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015, p. 9.

³⁴ Katherine C. Little. “The Politics of Lists.” *Exemplaria* 31.2 (2019), pp. 117-28.

Lev Manovich's overtly dramatic claim that recent digital media shift the logic of media from the "narrative" form of novels and cinema to the "database" format of digital computers misses the long and mixed history of scribal media. (...) Manovich's generalization illuminates a lot about the current environment but it is shortsighted historically. Stories and lists, with their respective preferences for temporal and spatial order, have always been competing and complementary principles in the history of recorded media. Writing has always been a database, since its invention in Mesopotamia³⁵

And lists may well *precede* writing if we follow Denise Schmandt-Besserat's convincing thesis in her work *How Writing Came About*³⁶ – before there was writing, there was already listing. Lists have always been a method to cope with such fundamental questions of human existence, namely, the unbridgeable gap between the one and the many.

Let us then suspend our opinions on the health of lists, looking past their seeming overlap with our own disenchantment with modern life, to observe instead what they do *in* and *to* literature. In this sense, this thesis embraces the two aspects described above: the list's strangeness and unicorn-like quality, effects which have persisted across the history of its reception, but also its ancient familiarity and infrastructural dimension. To posit the list as both strange and familiar is to underline its crucial presence in a variety of moments which constitute essential aspects of human life and its literary representations; it is also to ascribe a certain dose of oddity and even eeriness to its mere presence. An eccentricity which might lie in a certain strange quality of the very experiences themselves which the list means to portray or in the simple gesture of dispensing with narrative – that mode to whose explanatory force we have become so accustomed and attuned. This thesis analyses this strange other-quality of the *mode* of the list while hoping to show that there is nothing 'other' about it at all. It may be a unicorn, but the garden is still reasonable; or if unreasonable, then, at the very least, still human.

³⁵ John Durham Peters. *Op. cit.*, p. 290.

³⁶ Denise Schmandt-Besserat. *How Writing Came About*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996.

It is not so easy, however, to free ourselves from analyses premised on ‘otherness’ or ‘contrast’. One of the aspects which unite the three ‘schools’ described above is precisely a similar, however distinct in its particularities, emphasis on the comparison between list and narrative as a crucial premise for identifying and describing the list itself. Analyses of the list often underline its opposition to narrative and the necessity of a reflection on the ways by which list and narrative interact, their differences and similarities. More often than not, the presentation of the list as an object of study is done by contrast with a narrative default: Beye, for example, remarks that Homeric catalogues “all share in the essential quality of a list, namely, isolated pieces of information that gain a modest coherence or unity by the simple fact of juxtaposition. This,” he adds, “is something alien to narrative, no matter how paratactic the style in which the narrative is cast.”³⁷ Yet, to hone in on what exactly are those qualities is not an easy task – once again, the differences between list and narrative are cast in a contrastive mode, with Turin even remarking that “si l’on peut d’emblée l’identifier, typiquement comme archétypiquement, c’est parce qu’elle s’oppose au contexte narratif, local et historique, dans lequel elle s’inscrit.”³⁸

The contrastive tendency is widespread enough to the point where narrative might come to be associated with ‘normality’ and lists with extraordinary irruptions of the abnormal. Meandering list-like forms have, throughout history, been associated with racism (at the hands of Von Soden, for instance) but also sexism, with female ‘babbling’ often being opposed to male rational and structured discourse.³⁹ As mentioned above, lists are often put in the mouth of the delirious or those touched by divinity,⁴⁰ and we seem to show a preference for this literary form when we find ourselves at a loss for words. Narrative is still widely associated with health, its absence conforming

³⁷ Charles Rowan Beye. *Op. cit.*, p. 345.

³⁸ Gaspard Turin. *Op. cit.*, pp. 10-1.

³⁹ Anne Cotterill. *Digressive Voices in Early Modern English Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 14-5.

⁴⁰ See Bernardo Ferreira. *Entre Silêncio e Silêncio: Lista e Revelação*. 2018. University of Lisbon, School of Arts and Humanities. PhD dissertation, *Repositório da Universidade de Lisboa*, <repositorio.ul.pt/handle/10451/34787>.

to pathology⁴¹ and placing undue emphasis on this association is to value the connection between being human and being narrative. Some, like Galen Strawson, have rallied against this view,⁴² and as much as critics have convincingly noted that Strawson's argument falters at a number of points (namely, his is a particularly narrow conception of narrative – linear, causal, chronological, closed), it is easy to see its appeal, especially where it concerns the troubling ethical dimensions of the notion that a narrative default corresponds to some sense of normalcy.

Some critics, like Matti Hyvärinen, have nevertheless expressed sympathy with Strawson's concern, just as long as it is rephrased as a refusal of a conception of identity *strictly as conventional narrative*.⁴³ From here follow two possible avenues of reflection for our present work: the first concerns an honest exam of the actual richness of the notion of narrative, beyond Strawson's tendentious approach, and whether the list could, after all, be harmonised with it (this is very much the spirit of postclassical narratology). We can readily look at Fludernik's appeal to Fludernik's classic as one example of a notion of narrative in such terms which would render Strawson's argument obsolete. Crucially at stake is Fludernik's reduction of narrative to "experientiality without the necessity of any actantial groundwork." "There can be narratives without plot," she explains, but not without anthropomorphic experiencers. "Timeless or habitual situations," she adds, "do not trigger narrative dynamics, just as narratives cannot have everybody (or no one in particular) as their protagonist."⁴⁴ This would seemingly assuage Strawson's concerns while not infringing on the validity of those he terms "episodics." Moreover, a great number of texts which we would at first glance categorise outside the boundaries of narrative find themselves

⁴¹ "The narrative act, it needs to be emphasized, acquires a vital role in the construction of a sense of identity. Indeed, the view that the narrative rendering of lived experience engenders such a sense of identity seems to be supported by psychological studies, which indicate that *dysnarrativia*, ie. The inability to construct or understand stories, seriously impairs a sense of selfhood." Martin Löschnigg. "Postclassical Narratology and the Theory of Autobiography." *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses*. Columbus: Ohio State Press, 2010, p. 261.

⁴² Galen Strawson. "Against Narrativity." *Ratio (new series)* 17.4 (2004), pp. 428-52.

⁴³ Matti Hyvärinen. "'Against Narrativity' Reconsidered." *Disputable Core Concepts of Narrative*. Pieterlen: Peter Lang, 2012, pp. 327-46.

⁴⁴ Monika Fludernik. *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*. New York: Routledge, 2005, pp. 13, 29.

suddenly ‘narrativised’. Even literary modes, such as description, succumb to this fate: Fludernik’s proposal includes also Hamon’s structuring of the diverse descriptive systems (the observer, the enunciator, the doer⁴⁵), all of which imply a degree of experientiality – beyond “nobody” or “no one in particular.” Of course, some lists are readily excluded from this model, since they do present timeless or habitual situations devoid of identifiable protagonists – we will see that that is precisely the case with *Bouvard et Pécuchet*.

The second question concerns the authors of our *corpus* – those who chose to make lists rather than something else – and the degree to which they might have perceived their own work as being *against* narrative. How should we understand this positioning together with a deliberately generous understanding of narrative? Or, putting it plainly, do we proceed by considering narrative in a ‘poor’ sense, as Strawson supposedly does, or do we consider that it is the authors who, for a variety of reasons, engage with oversimplified notions about what narrative can be? Even if such lists would not seem to diverge fundamentally from Fludernik’s model, for example, their authors often cast their efforts precisely in terms of a contrast with a presumed narrative background. Sei Shōnagon writes of the origins of *The Pillow Book* as an exercise in the female court specifically designed to oppose the copying of the “*Records of the Historian* over at His Majesty’s court.”⁴⁶ The narrator of *Moby-Dick* apologises for his meandering discourse against “what there may be of a narrative in this book.”⁴⁷ Flaubert saved his worries for his correspondence – as we will see, the necessity and consequences of dispensing with narrative were never far from his concerns. For all of them, lists arrive as ruptures, as windows into worlds marginalised by monopolies of narrative and “alternate logics, spaces, and times.”⁴⁸ In the first section – “Listing as Counting” – we will

⁴⁵ Philippe Hamon. *Du descriptif*. Paris: Hachette Livre, 1993, pp. 172-97.

⁴⁶ *The Pillow Book*, p. 255.

⁴⁷ *Moby-Dick*, p. 221.

⁴⁸ Liam Cole Young. *Op. cit.*, p. 132.

closely analyse such instances, from explicit anguishes and declarations of the authors to the solutions offered by the mode of the list.

The problem, in simple terms, is the following: if we broaden the notion of narrative too much there is nothing extraordinary which warrants the invention of new denominations and methodologies, but then we would be ignoring the stated dilemmas and intentions of the authors and the texts – what does it mean to state that one is writing *against* narrative? Given that almost all of the texts present the case in such apologetic terms, we cannot avoid asking the texts and ourselves “what is there to apologise for?”

If we ignore this question, an argument could be made for the creation of a serious perceptual paradox, by which we recognise just how much of the world and human textual production and technique rests upon the form of the list while simultaneously placing so much weight on the claim, as Peter Brooks observes, that we live in the age of narrative. But lists are not merely narratives in temporary chrysalis – they are a class of their own, with unique epistemological, hermeneutical, and ontological qualities. With unique ways of *meaning* facts about the world which a single focus on narrative will inevitably pass over in silence. The consequence of this would be a terrible loss of meaning: meaning about the world, meaning about the texts we read, and meaning about a non-narrative mode of understanding human existence, as Brooks himself concludes:

Narrative is one of the large categories in our use of language to represent the world—but not the only one. The distinction may put us on notice that the neglect of one pole for the other ought to arouse our critical attention: something has been skewed. The seeming obliteration in the public sphere of other forms of expression by narrative suggests that something in our culture has gone astray. Do we really want all our understandings to be expressed in narrative terms? Isn't there a risk of making “story” an excuse from other kinds of understanding?⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Peter Brooks. *Seduced by Story: The Use and Abuse of Narrative*. New York: New York Review Books, 2022. eBook.

Attending to the reasoning of the authors in our *corpus* for producing lists *in lieu* of narratives might offer an opportunity to engage in further contrastive reasoning. All the texts fall neatly, for example, into systems such as Robyn R. Warhol's which propose four distinct situations for when things become *unnarratable*: the *subnarratable*, the *supranarratable*, the *antinarratable*, and the *paranarratable*.⁵⁰ But ultimately it is simply not productive to contrast whatever definition of the list we prefer with every single theory of narrative or version of what narrative is; narrative is too broad a concept and so is list. Besides which, they are better understood not as antithetical binomials, but as systems which often commingle and enrich one another on different planes: naturally, lists can easily be turned into or read as narratives just as narratives can be turned into lists (the famous trailer made for Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris* is a perfect example). Even the description of this contrast framed by Lev Manovich between analogue narratives and digital databases is best if articulated, as N. Katherine Hayles writes, as a "symbiosis" rather than, as Manovich popularised, "natural enemies," and that, consequently, narrative and database were never in any contest to begin with, and one will never make the other "fade from the scene:"

Symbionts are organisms of different species that have a mutually beneficial relation. (...)

Because database can construct relational juxtapositions but is helpless to interpret or explain them, it needs narrative to make its results meaningful.⁵¹

Perhaps it is, as Hayles (and many others) considers, that narrative is a temporal technology, and the list a spatial one – a notion that, given that human beings inhabit both space and time, offers itself

⁵⁰ "According to a given narrative," writes Warhol, 1) the *subnarratable* refers to "what needn't be told," such as the everyday and the ordinary; 2) the *supranarratable* concerns ineffable elements, those which "can't be told;" 3) the *antinarratable* concerns those things which "shouldn't be told," lest they produce undesirable results; 4) and the *paranarratable*, that is, what simply "wouldn't be told," according to, for instance, genre conventions: the nineteenth-century novel heroine can either "get married or die," any other options being *paranarratable*. It is simple to relate each of the texts in our *corpus* to each category: *The Pillow Book* and *Pseudodoxia* could be inscribed into the category of the *antinarratable*, as they describe political concerns and projects which are contrary to social order; *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Cities* are particularly devoted to expressions of the *supranarratable*: the ineffables of the whale, Venice, or the affects of melancholy and wonder; and finally, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* has a double allegiance to both the *subnarratable* (with its insistence on representing the ordinary and trivial gestures which comprise friendship) but also the *paranarratable*, evident in Flaubert's dilemma between the form of the novel and his own ambitions for the work. See Robyn R. Warhol. "Neonarrative; or, How to Render the Unnarratable in Realist Fiction and Contemporary Film." James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz (eds.). *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp. 222, 226.

⁵¹ N. Katherine Hayles. "Narrative and Database: Natural Symbionts." *PMLA* 122.5 (2007), p. 1603.

as a simple account for their necessary symbiosis.⁵² Yet, once again, this kind of strict formalism does little justice to either list or narrative. As we will see, the list can be spatial just as it can tackle questions of order, it can include just as it can exclude, its ‘helplessness’ is more deliberate than at first sight, and it can, in short, address the same issues and concerns as narrative, offering nothing but another window into the same house.

The first step in articulating a space for the list must not be a negative description of its properties which would tend towards an articulation of a kind of anti-narrative system: if narrative does A, then the list does B. We might try to define the list by what it does, as Barney does when writing that “lists are better connected but less transitive than stories. Lists require sharp aliorelativity and connexity, but may be symmetrical and intransitive.”⁵³ Sammons develops this definition and explains it:

much like narrative, a list presents items that are more than one in number (aliorelativity) and have something to do with one another (connexity); but quite unlike narrative, the order of its items may be reversible (symmetrical) or subject to free transpositions (intransitive). What is lacking in a catalogue are those subordinating relations—chronological, logical, or causal—which usually do much of the work in narrational or overtly rhetorical presentation of data.⁵⁴

This kind of definition has always provided much room for debate, nuance, and clarification since it is easy to get lost in examples of narratives which also do these things or lists which do not. But as Sammons’ explanation shows, the end result is still a delineating of narrative’s shadow. Instead, the first step must be to assume that what is being done when one proposes the list (or anything else) as having autonomy and validity on par with narrative carries several methodological and intellectual consequences, and to analyse what those are in the first place.

⁵² *Idem*, p. 1606.

⁵³ Stephen A. Barney. *Op. cit.*, p. 192.

⁵⁴ Benjamin Sammons. *Op. cit.*, p. 15.

Any notions on an alternative, other, or contrastive essence of the list pose some problems of which the researcher of lists should be aware and which are well explained by Turin's warning against the tendency of assimilating the list to a "contre-monde" and the ridiculous notion of seeing in it a "résurgence d'un flot obscur et mythique, qui courrait, secrètement et de toute éternité, sous la page."⁵⁵ Turin's retort to the issue might be to step back and look carefully at the lists themselves and their inscription into determinate historical, cultural, and literary contexts.⁵⁶ Our approach is different: it is indeed ridiculous to see in the list the anti-world of the narrative world. More than a, still conditional, 'anti-world', the list can be, quite simply, an 'other-world', a *mode* in relation to which the world of narrative becomes one other *mode* among many. We have repeatedly seen how the list is often tied to this word: Goody uses it, and, after him, so do many others. But it is hardly ever clearly defined. While to the narrative scholar, it might have seemed pointless to demonstrate the validity of considering narrative as a mode of thought (its importance being often taken as self-evident), to postulate the list as an equally valid mode requires us to engage with or consider some sort of model which can account for the coexistence of modes.

In this sense, we take the liberty to summarise the usages of "mode" and to contextualise our own in reference to Michael Oakeshott's definition of the term. The most crucial aspect of Oakeshott's definition concerns the separation between a mere "attitude or point of view" and what he terms an "autonomous manner of understanding (...) logically incapable of denying or confirming the conclusions of any other mode of understanding, or indeed of making any relevant utterance in respect of it."⁵⁷ Because these modes of experience are not "separable part[s] of reality, but the whole from a limited standpoint," "experience as a coherent world of ideas, actually implies diversity."⁵⁸ In other words, neither list nor narrative can be the be-all and end-all of

⁵⁵ Gaspard Turin. *Op. cit.*, p. 182.

⁵⁶ *Idem*, p. 11.

⁵⁷ Michael Oakeshott. "Present Future and Past." *On History and Other Essays*. Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1938, p. 2.

⁵⁸ Michael Oakeshott. *Experience and Its Modes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 70-1.

representational models of the real, neither has a higher claim to truth than the other; they are limited views from a chosen standpoint, revealing some things and ignoring others. The question of relevance is perhaps even more significant, since every single work in our *corpus* deals at some point with the following dilemma (often in the guise of external criticism): certain elements which appear as essential given their relationship to the represented object and the chosen literary mode of discourse of the list appear as trivialities if one adopts a narrativising approach. The answer, following Oakeshott, is quite simple: what is perceived as trivial in the list from the perspective of narrative merely indicates a mismatch between modes or, in his words, an analytical fallacy.⁵⁹ The first chapter of the thesis deals extensively with this issue.

The ability to think the list as something which precedes writing, as a mode of understanding, more than a rhetorical or writerly practice results in a central premise to the present study: what we propose here is that the list is not *only* a microscopic object, observable and interpretable solely at ‘page-level’ – even if this is its unquestionably more familiar guise. What is proposed here is a reading of the texts in our *corpus* as lists as well as works that *contain* lists. Taking the list as a mode of understanding, we can regard *whole texts* as lists – whether they contain what we usually call ‘a list’ inside them or not –, often deriving from the analysis of the traditional lists found therein useful methods and tools to look at their larger counterparts.

As such, we will not restrict ourselves to the lists in *The Pillow Book*, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, etc. We will take the texts as lists in their entirety, adopting what may be called a *macroscopic* approach. The line of investigation followed here proposes that when we read works such as *Moby-Dick* or *Bouvard et Pécuchet* as lists and not narratives, meanings and themes come to the forefront, leveraging the form of the list to achieve their expressive potential. We will, nevertheless, often take the microscopic list also as an object of study. However, the overarching

⁵⁹ “There is not direct relationship between any two of these modes of experience (...). Consequently, it is impossible to pass in argument from any one of these worlds of ideas to any other without involving ourselves in a confusion. (...) And the result of all such attempts is the most subtle and insidious of all forms of error—irrelevance.” *Idem*, pp. 75-6.

goal is precisely to propose a methodological equivalency between one scale and the other. In other words, microscopic lists might be easier to ‘see’ but any conclusions we might take from their analysis serve just as well to think of their macroscopic counterparts.

This premise carries an implication that we will not pursue but is worth keeping in mind: it suggests that the analysis and interpretative tools presented here can serve to confront a list at any scale: from the list on the page to whole works as lists, to multiple works (anthologies, collections, an *œuvre*) as a list. The fundamental interpretative strategies are, we argue, not significantly impaired by the change in scale. After all, this is how narrative is often conceived of: a category of understanding more than a strictly literary or technical definition. We speak of historical narratives, political narratives, medical narratives, in short, anything and everything received as part of the ‘narrative turn.’ Rarely do we search for narrative in a single page or fragment, instead treating it precisely as a *mode* of relation to the whole text before us (and even to reality).⁶⁰ But ‘list’ serves just as well for all such purposes. This is also the reason why there is no text in the *corpus* which could be termed as nothing but a list, but rather texts whose structure and themes invite our reading of them as lists.

Thus, a mode of understanding is more than a mode of reading. It is a stance towards the Real, not only to texts, and to assume the existence of a mode of the list must lead us to consider and analyse it beyond its contextual particularities. What is also proposed here, then, is an approach to the phenomenon of listing that, while departing from a variety of texts (a variety of times, places, genres, etc.), aims to disclose, above all, similarities. The mode of the list possesses something constant throughout all such examples. For these reasons, the chosen *corpus* is deliberately varied: we go from eleventh-century Japan, through a lesser-known seventeenth-century English encyclopaedia, to the post-modernist aesthetics of the *Oulipo* group and Italo Calvino. Herman

⁶⁰ As Fludernik herself underlines: “narrative texts are therefore, first and foremost, texts that are read narratively. (...) The process of reading narrative as narrative inevitably involves an act of narrativization on the reader’s part.” Monika Fludernik. *Op. cit.*, pp. 313-5.

Melville's *magnum opus* is juxtaposed to Gustave Flaubert's last, unfinished, work. And all this with no unifying theme but a mere intuition that all configure such unicorns, and that the study of lists is neither the study of modernity nor of contemporary *malaise* (as according to, for example, the concerns of Katherine C. Little mentioned earlier).

Such goals engender particular methodological quirks, namely, the recurring de-historicisation and de-contextualisation of the texts. Indeed, this is often the case here, and although we try our best to understand and include a number of considerations regarding the contexts of the creation of our lists (and, above all, certain philosophical concepts, such as attention, taboo, circularity, or triviality), the ulterior motives behind this investigation, again, refer more to the belief in the existence of a common mode of the list than to any kind of circumstantial 'discursive' analysis. In this light, we found it best to articulate these concerns with the notion of *cultural technique* derived from media studies, which provides both the framework to understand these phenomena in a transcultural and transhistorical perspective, while also allowing us to focus on the processes on listing – its techniques – rather than solely on the final result – the lists.

The notion of cultural technique emerged from German Media Theory over the last decades, largely on the steps of influential media scholar Friedrich Kittler's research, although it should not, as Jussi Parikka warns, "be reduced to an afterglow of Kittler."⁶¹ The concept itself has a complex history (no less because of its ultimate origin in techniques of culture, as in *agriculture*) and one could look beyond Kittler into the influence of figures such as Walter Ong, Claude Lévi-Strauss, or Marcel Mauss. But if such previous incarnations consigned the "culture" of cultural technique to activities and fields which, despite their variety, are still easily linked to culture with a capital-C (with the exception of Mauss) – from mass media culture to writing, reading, or counting –, Bernard Siegert has aptly summarised the current state of cultural techniques in an interview with Winthrop-Young: "now, however, cultural techniques may be seen to encompass everything from gadgets,

⁶¹ Jussi Parikka. "Afterword: Cultural Techniques and Media Studies." *Theory, Culture and Society* 30.6 (2013), p. 148.

artifacts, and infrastructures all the way to skills, procedures, technologies. Not only machines but legal procedures, sacred rituals, and so on.”⁶² Listing too, in the broad sense we approach it here, can be a technique.

We find a simultaneously precise and broad definition of cultural technique precisely in the introduction to Siegert’s *Cultural Techniques: Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*, which he articulates in five points:

- 1) “when we speak of cultural techniques,” he writes, “we envisage a more or less complex actor network that comprises technological objects as well as the operative chains they are part of and that configure or constitute them.” In other words, cultural techniques precede media itself, and their operations must not exclude the material components involved in them;
- 2) the notion of cultural technique adopts a posthumanist posture which does not see “man as the only, exclusive subject of culture” or, in the words of Cornelia Vismann, “from the vantage point of cultural techniques, the sovereign subject becomes disempowered, and it is things that are invested with agency instead”⁶³;
- 3) the third item restates Siegert’s answer to Winthrop-Young quoted above;
- 4) the notion of cultural technique presumes that culture “begins with the introduction of distinctions” such as “inside/outside, pure/impure, sacred/profane, female/male,” etc. “The analysis of cultural techniques observes and describes techniques involved in operationalizing distinctions in the real,” and “all cultural techniques are based on the transition from nondistinction to distinction and back.” As Siegert further clarifies in the interview with Winthrop-Young, “ontologies are [...] produced. Within the context of cultural techniques, the production occurs via what we call ontic operations, or chains of operations;”⁶⁴

⁶² Bernard Siegert. Interview conducted by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young. “Material World: An Interview With Bernhard Siegert.” *Artforum* <artforum.com/print/201506/material-world-an-interview-with-bernhard-siegert-52281>.

⁶³ Cornelia Vismann. *Op. cit.*, p. 86. Here also we see the main point of contention with a textualist approach: writing is not exclusive to humans.

⁶⁴ Bernard Siegert. *Op. cit.*

5) finally, cultural techniques do not belong to either side of the distinction. They are a third element that mediates between them and precedes them and, by occupying this third space, always contain the possibility of liquidating said distinctions. They are interfaces “between cultural orders and a real that cannot be symbolized.”⁶⁵

The study of lists is not a stranger to the theory of cultural technique, in large measure due to Liam Cole Young’s comprehensive study within the context of media philosophy. What we propose here, however, is distinct from his proposal. If Young focused on practical lists, our focus instead is on poetic lists – or, at the very least, lists whose textual context is undoubtedly literary.⁶⁶ However, to use the frame of cultural technique to study such lists means also to import a number of concerns which are usually absent from these kinds of studies. Most significantly, it means focusing on those techniques that are more clearly found in practical lists. This is how we will approach the texts in our *corpus*: by analysing them in light of a number of technologies and techniques which are usually associated with their practical counterparts, such as the techniques of the itinerary, the double-entry bookkeeping system, and the inventory.

The argument we advance here considers the hypothesis that poetic lists and pragmatic lists do not fundamentally differ in their associated techniques and operations. We can think of how Young, departing from Belknap’s text frames his project against a perceived excessive focus on poetic lists:

just as [Belknap] looks first at what lists do in literature before speculating about what they are or mean, so too must we look at what pragmatic lists do. Starting with an

⁶⁵ Bernard Siegert. *Cultural Techniques: Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015, pp. 11-5.

⁶⁶ One of the distinctions often used to clarify what sort of lists fall under a given analysis is the poetic-pragmatic axis or, under different monikers, literary and practical, etc. Under different names, Young, Eco, and Belknap resort to this division to qualify and describe different types of listing activities. In the context of the present corpus, it would seemingly make sense to speak of poetic lists as the subject of this analysis. Yet, the correct qualification for a given list often becomes troubling and liable to the kind of exception-making that towers over the norm: are shopping lists quoted in a novel poetic or pragmatic? Are lists of the dead poetic or pragmatic? The confusion surrounding these terms is evident in the contradictory statements produced by the authors above, even when the examples chosen appear to support their conclusions. In the end, an exercise as simple as the application of the semiotic square to the categories ‘poetic’ and ‘pragmatic’ easily shows the full nuance and complexity of the matter, further giving credence to the willingness to not adhere so strictly to these categories or their strict binomial approach. See Appendix A for this analysis, too long to be inserted here.

essential definition of what a list is or means—or even using these as animating questions—shuts down the generative potential of analysis.⁶⁷

We resist providing definitions *a priori* for the same reason. Instead, we adopt a hybrid approach: we look at what lists do in literature through a *supposedly* pragmatic lens. This raises two questions. The first is what does it mean to think the list as a result of a cultural technique and to study it as such? What are the methodological and intellectual implications of this premise? The second, of a more practical nature, is the following: what are, then, the techniques of listing?

Regarding the first question, in the first place (and as mentioned above), it means that we should think of the thing we recognise as a list as the result of the cultural technique of listing, which precedes it in a technical and technological sense (listing creates the list) but also in a historical sense – there was listing long before there were lists. We can thus speak of listing, we can describe it and analyse its operations and procedures, without having as a necessary point of arrival those texts generally called lists. Naturally, as Vismann rightfully points out, it is necessary to depart from technology in order to study technique (to derive the operational script from the resulting operation⁶⁸) – from the visible counterpart to the mediating invisible. This would appear to create an issue for analyses of ‘poetic’ lists since their techniques are not to be found in the paper trail that evinces them (unlike pragmatic lists), the instructions of use which configure “a layman’s ultimate form of access to implicit or tacit knowledge.”⁶⁹ However, this is where the textualist methodology of Turin suddenly evinces its pertinence – as Bernhard Siegert explains, self-referentiality is how “the system opens up reference to the outside, makes itself observable from the outside. And this is a crucially important point. The system can make reference to the outside only by dealing with its own aesthetic properties.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Liam Cole Young. *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁶⁸ Cornelia Vismann. *Op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁶⁹ *Idem*, p. 88.

⁷⁰ Bernhard Siegert. Interview conducted by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young. “Material World: An Interview With Bernhard Siegert.” *Artforum* <artforum.com/print/201506/material-world-an-interview-with-bernhard-siegert-52281>.

Secondly, it means to focus on the operations of listing first, and the content of the lists second. Naturally, because what we will be studying are not practical lists, there must be even more careful attention to avoid that sensibility of media studies which, as Peters observes, tends to treat content as an epiphenomenon.⁷¹ But the content and, more importantly, the meaning of such lists is subordinated to and engendered by the techniques of those very same lists: “the format,” writes Young, “was the message.”⁷² For this reason, the thesis does not have a thematic structure (as is customary for anthologies of poetic lists) but an operational one. Each section, each chapter, and each text will call for their own themes, and the thesis stands by the principle of the media philosopher that “you should use the entire library as your source”⁷³ (a principle which should also guide the comparatist); we depart from the techniques of listing assumed to be inherent and crucially structural to each of the texts in order to touch on other subjects: political and aristocratic diplomacy, the philosophy of friendship, tree diagrams of Darwinian evolution, fungi and hieroglyphs, the nature of names, financial technology, etc.

Lastly, to conceive of a technique of listing as the basis for comparison among such different texts is to partially abandon historical or culturally contextualising perspectives. The ‘list’ is taken up as a concept receptive to a ‘general’ analysis (and a number of tentative generalisations) falling beyond and before historical or cultural considerations. There is, naturally, some attention given to these aspects – some techniques depend on historical and material circumstances – but, largely, the present analysis does not assume that the list is better understood in light of a specifically definable historical frame and its ‘discourses’, suspecting instead that a greater number of similarities than differences can be found throughout its different uses across the various examples in our *corpus*. ‘Listing’ is here taken up as a transhistorical, transcultural, and even transmedial (although we leave this for further investigations) concept.

⁷¹ John Durham Peters. *Op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁷² Liam Cole Young, *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁷³ *Idem*, p. 29.

Addressing the second question, enumerating the techniques of the list (which serve to structure this work) forces us to define it in some way, despite our reservations. A measured approach to try to, at the very least, agree on talking terms is to define its constituents. We can thus say that a list must always have three elements: a rubric, items, and a border. The rubric of the list is the paradigm to its paradigmatic nature, the “*pantonyme*” of Hamon or the “organising principle” of Jackson.⁷⁴ It is the terms which follow the expression “a list of ...”; the items of the list are self-explanatory. Mostly, they constitute what we usually call the list, even if it is easy to understand that without a rubric, the presence of items might stop making sense (Hamon called such lists with no *pantonyme* “mysterious”); the border of the list is a conceptual one but whose origins are material. Etymologically, “list” meant first the edge of the paper upon which a list was inscribed, not the writing itself. We intuitively understand this ability of lists to come alive not by any activity of inscription, but rather of circumscription. The list of inhabitants in an apartment building is defined, before we even begin listing them, by the border of the building. Stanley Fish, in his famous class, resorted to this quality of lists when he “drew a frame around the assignment,” in order to force his students to see the enclosed terms as one single list-poem.⁷⁵

As such, each of these elements is indispensable and the list is the result of all three working together. This thesis looks at three distinct notions of technique to describe a tripartite technique of listing: counting, circumscribing, and naming. Each of these three techniques can be associated with one of those basic elements of the list. Counting concerns the production of items; circumscribing concerns the production of a border; and naming concerns the production of the rubric. Listing is counting, naming, and circumscribing – all at once.

Given the emphasis on operations, this thesis is thus structured around this tripartite gesture.

The first chapter considers the list as a technique of counting. We begin with a general and

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Jackson. “‘Not Simply Lists’: An Eddic Perspective on Short-Item Lists in Old-English Poems.” *Speculum* 73 (1998), p. 343.

⁷⁵ Stanley Fish. “How to Recognise a Poem When You See One.” *Is There a Text In This Class?: The Authority of Interpretative Communities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980, p. 323.

introductory description of counting and its relationship with certain perceived and actual characteristics of listing: like counting, listing can be a way of compartmentalising reality into identifiable chunks, into items which can be listed or counted. Since counting is also the aspect of listing which concerns the generation of new items, this section also serves as a more in-depth introduction to the texts and the principal ways which govern the introduction of new literary material as items into their lists. We divide this first section into three chapters, each concerning a particular technology whose operations are closely analysed in relation to certain texts. Thus, the first chapter compares *The Pillow Book* and *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* as literary equivalents to the inventory list, and its associations with loss, embodiment, and political utopia. The second chapter, on *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, focuses on the double-list. More specifically, on the double-entry bookkeeping technique pioneered by Venetian merchants in the sixteenth century, in order to analyse how the representation of friendship in Flaubert's novel similarly depends on strategies of 'double-entry'. The third chapter of this section analyses the itinerary list and its relation with curiosity and travel in *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Cities*, presenting it as a possible solution to the 'inciting incident' present in both works: melancholy.

The second and third chapters bring together all five works in order to survey their individual relations with the remaining two techniques of listing. The second chapter analyses listing as a technique of circumscribing by looking at the diverse strategies by which each of the texts navigates one of the most important distinctions produced by the list: inside versus outside. It analyses the importance of "control" in the navigation of the tension between inclusion and exclusion or, as Sammons puts it, the centrifugal and the centripetal tendencies of the list.⁷⁶ In this chapter, we also present a spatial understanding of the list, grounded on the notion of diagram, which allows the list-maker to uniquely position themselves in relation to their list. The third chapter does the same for

⁷⁶ Benjamin Sammons. *The Art and Rhetoric of the Homeric Catalogue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, *passim*.

the technique of naming. For each text, it considers the question of their possible rubrics, treating the production of items in the list as a way to approach and circle around its rubric as a central idea, whose ineffable and fundamentally undefinable quality renders it almost taboo. Furthermore, we follow through with the questions raised in the previous chapter, by analysing how the emergence of the rubric articulates notions of authorship and authority which must find unique meanings in the list.

This approach allows us also to evade the necessity of offering a single *a priori* definition of our object of study, and offer instead multiple definitions – to open up the field as much as possible and to let the texts close in on any answers. Approaching the list from a variety of directions, we hope to free it from some of the usual constraints which often limit what it can be. What we can offer, however, are three theses which have constituted the main premises supporting this investigation, which also function as conditions to not foreclose any conclusions and summarise everything mentioned above:

- 1) The list is an *autonomous form* from narrative. In other words, it is not assimilable to any category of *ancilla narrationis* nor is it something which occurs ‘in-between’ narrative portions or understandable only within the parameters of narrativist interpretations;
- 2) The list is, like narrative, more than a mode of literary discourse, comprising instead a *mode of understanding*. Listing is a way of making sense of the real and of certain experiences and affective relationships which find in it the single most appropriate means of expression and representation;
- 3) The notion of *cultural technique* is the best way to understand the notion of listing as a mode of understanding, and the list is the result of a *threefold cultural technique*: a technique of counting, naming, and circumscribing. Whenever one lists, one counts, names, and circumscribes, and the fullest poetic and expressive capabilities of the form of the literary list are best understood in light of this threefold gesture.

If pressed to summarise all this into a single leading question, we might arrive at the following: what is a list? The ‘short’ answer would be an articulation of the three points enumerated above (“a mode of understanding, of discourse, autonomous to narrative, transhistorical and transcultural, whose fundamental expressive capabilities depend on the articulation of a triple gesture of counting, circumscribing, and naming, the three of which, together, comprise the act of listing”). But in order to properly answer the question and give some sense of how the list works – *how* it is, rather than *what* – we move now to the ‘long’ answer, which cannot be reduced to such statements and depends ultimately on the specific uses and meanings of the texts. Only by a close reading of the texts as instances of the chains of operations involved in listing can we hope to arrive at a fruitful answer; only by questioning *why* these specific texts are lists rather than something else can we begin to understand what lists, in the end, are *for*.

Lastly, before attending to the matter at hand, there is an undeniable tendency to turn the study into the studied thing, and the allure of lists enhances this feeling. Belknap described it well: “accumulating samples was easy – I had such a big collection that I feared my dissertation would become ‘The Book of Lists’ and I might be forever known as ‘the List Man.’”⁷⁷ I have often felt the same danger, and many portions of the analyses began to appear as lists of cases, images, readings, and suggestions. Some of what is proposed here is ambitious, and (like in a list) definite conclusions are sometimes only hinted at rather than fully developed, often not in a causal way. Borrowing the wise words of Thomas Browne, “we are not Magisterial in opinions, nor have we Dictator-like obtruded our conceptions; in the humility of Enquiries or disquisitions, have only proposed them unto more ocular discerners”⁷⁸; borrowing the wiser words of Ishmael, “there are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method.”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Robert E. Belknap. *Op. cit.*, p. xii.

⁷⁸ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 6.

⁷⁹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 395.

I. Listing as Counting

“Can you do Addition?” the White Queen asked. “What’s one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one?”

“I don’t know,” said Alice, “I lost count.”

— Through the Looking Glass, Lewis Carroll

The broad activity of listing comprises a series of distinct techniques. We will begin by concerning ourselves with one: the list as a technique of counting. In this way, we look to the enumerative properties of the list, which is to say its accumulative dimensions, first and foremost. We concern ourselves with the notion of listing as the collecting of disparate items, as a concept defined firstly by this inner, expanding, multitude, but also with how new items are produced and added to it: what rules, contingencies, limitations, freedoms, are afforded to each item and each list. To this end, the texts will be divided into three sections, each referring to a specific technique of listing or operational principle: the inventory, the double-entry bookkeeping ledger, and, lastly, the itinerary. In this short introduction, we depart from the notion of enumeration to consider the relation between listing and counting, and, afterwards, introduce the broader questions this idea poses to listing and literature.

What is Counting?

In *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll demonstrates the easiest way to make a simple list, however unorthodox we might find it: to *enumerate*, even if no distinction is awarded to the items produced by this enumeration – to indulge in the simple practice of “addition,” or, as we would term it in the list, *accumulation*. In this strange place, where the text of Carroll lists and Alice answers that she loses “count,” the list plainly reveals itself also as a technique of counting just as much as writing. Of course, counting in this way *is* writing or, rather, it precedes it. As Denise Schmandt-Besserat explains, “writing resulted not only from new bureaucratic demands but from

the invention of abstract counting. The most important evidence uncovered is that counting was not, as formerly assumed, subservient to writing; on the contrary, writing emerged from counting.”⁸⁰ Lists underscore this aspect particularly well since it is easy to tie the production of lists before the advent of writing to a variety of counting practices related to the observation and accounting of natural events such as, as Thomas Macho considers, “hunting records, the moonrise, menstruation cycles. It was quite possible,” he continues, “to count without corresponding words or signs, such as with the aid of notches in bones, fingers, or stones that were meant to represent the object to be counted: animals in a herd, soldiers, or distances (as with the Greek hodometer).”⁸¹

Indeed, the most basic list might be the one which registers the time of cyclical events via such simple marks, some of which have become culturally recognised common practices up to this day: when Robinson Crusoe traces lines, each of which represents one day, the resulting list enumerates the days he spent on the island. Crusoe’s list’s similarities to the example of counting “animals in a herd” and the presumed origins of Mesopotamian writing as a product of such notational systems suggests listing as ultimately having some parentage in such hybrid practices, between counting and writing. Because writing comprises both an alphabetic and a numeric mode (“the failure to make this distinction” being, in the words of Brian Rotman, an instance of “the *alphabetic dogma*”⁸²), one might lean towards subsuming Crusoe’s marks (and earlier forms of counting notation) under what we have come to know as ‘list.’

To search for where counting resides in listing, we might begin by considering that the White Queen’s problem and Crusoe’s marks are very similar lists: we could represent the latter alphabetically by discretely assigning a meaning to each “one” in relation to the rubric “days:” one (day) and one (day) and one (day), etc. Yet, the more notable similarity between marks on wood, stone, or bone, and the question of the White Queen concerns the way by which the meaning and

⁸⁰ Denise Schmandt-Besserat. *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁸¹ Thomas Macho. *Op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁸² Brian Rotman. *Mathematics as Sign: Writing, Imagining, Counting*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 54.

significance of each of the items as a countable thing does not derive from any intrinsic difference between them but from the act of *separating* them from one another, turning “time” into “days” or “ten” into a series of “ones.” This, according to Gregory Bateson, is what renders them *countable*:

Numbers are the product of counting. Quantities are the product of measurement. This means that numbers can conceivably be accurate because there is a discontinuity between each integer and the next. Between two and three there is a jump. In the case of quantity there is no such jump, and because jump is missing in the world of quantity it is impossible for any quantity to be exact.⁸³

In defining counting as predicated on the identification of such discontinuities, we see that the same kind of language is often used in a variety of critical approaches which define the list in terms of what we may now understand as a “technique of counting.” Sève, for example, writes that the list implies “la discontinuité de ses éléments, les mots y sont comme isolés les uns des autres.”⁸⁴ Ian Bogost similarly underlines this quality, defining the list as “a group of items loosely joined not by logic or power or use but by the gentle knot of the comma.”⁸⁵ The list’s “inexpressiveness,” he adds, lies in this resistance to collapse onto rubrics. He quotes Francis Spufford who further relates lists to practices of discontinuous accumulation:

Lists, however, divide, or leave divided, the things they include. They offer only the relationship of accumulation: *I, you, love, sky, fall, purchase, Mr Murdoch, The Times*. Lists refuse the connecting powers of language, in favor of a sequence of disconnected elements.⁸⁶

Sammons’ definition is more articulate while hinging on the same principle: “a catalogue is a list of items which are specified in discrete entries; (...) no explicit relation is made between the items except for their shared suitability to the catalogue’s specified rubric.”⁸⁷ In short, to depart from such

⁸³ Gregory Bateson. *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unit*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979, p. 49.

⁸⁴ Bernard Sève. *Op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁸⁵ Ian Bogost. *Alien Phenomenology or What It’s Like to Be a Thing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012, p. 38.

⁸⁶ Francis Spufford. *Op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁸⁷ Benjamin Sammons. *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

definitions of “list” is to prioritise its essence as residing in the individual items that compose it as being ultimately unassimilable unto each other; that despite their inclusion in the same list, under the same rubric, they remain ultimately isolated, and the list discontinuous. Thus, it is when listing concerns both the identification and register of discontinuities that we also begin to count. On the one hand, such lists exist because the world is understood to be, in some way, discontinuous enough in itself to be amenable to being listed along distinct elements. Conversely, the technique of counting also creates a series of artificial and arbitrary divisions without which the activity of listing would not be possible at all: it filters the real by revealing the ways in which things are not connected but isolated. As Spufford underlines, they both “divide, and leave divided.”

What concerns us here, however, is also the question of what kind of literature is produced by such a mode of writing, as a result of a technique which heavily relies on the mutually addressing discontinuous nature of world and text. In stylistic or rhetorical terms, this discontinuity shows itself in an increased perception of the *digressiveness* of the list. Between one item and the other, there is always a “jump,” or a small digression: “il est inévitable,” Pierre Bayard observes, “que des digressions se glissent dans un système d’écriture qui revendique la distance entre les choses comme un principe esthétique majeur.”⁸⁸ Young similarly considers an increase of digressiveness due to the list’s flirting with discontinuity, writing that “the list continuously denies the order we assume it will provide. It instead invites breaks, ruptures, disjunctions, interruptions, diversions, digressions, contradictions, revisions, recursions, and reversals.”⁸⁹ In inviting this approach, the list invokes a number of affordances resulting in the recognition of its nature as digressive. In this analysis, we will focus specifically on the idea of digression.

To return to the issue of contrast between list and narrative, this increased sense of redundancy or extraneity, born out of the effects enumerated by Young, seems to make list forms

⁸⁸ Pierre Bayard. *Op. cit.*, p. 68.

⁸⁹ Liam Cole Young. *Op. cit.*, p. 148.

particularly receptive to reflections on utility or artfulness, on questions such as ‘why this, why here, why now?’ If we take Gerald Prince’s definition of the *narratable* – “that which is *worthy of being told*; that which is susceptible of or calls for narration”⁹⁰ – the list as a technique of counting begins, by virtue of the digressive quality of its accumulative process, to distance itself from narrative also in terms of a troubling distinction (or lack thereof) between the trivial digression and the essential point. As Bayard further elaborates, to identify a digression in a text is always to ask whether it is trivial or essential to our understanding of it. But this ‘other’ writing – one which includes and indulges in digressions – is instead closer to what Ross Chambers terms “loiterature,” disquieting precisely because it troubles our understanding of the nature of the literary. As he writes, no distinction between the trivial and the essential (and thus no digression) is possible to locate in a mode of writing in which “no point can ever be ‘the’ point:”

For the end-directedness of suspense and the goal-oriented consistency of single-mindedness, it substitutes a kind of relaxed openness, and endless availability to otherness that means one can never *arrive*, since no point can ever be “the” point. But, frustrating as it is to seekers after event, linearity, cohesion, consistency and conclusiveness, such a style also involves frustrations of its own, for it turns out both that digressivity is escalatory—one digression leads inevitably to another—and that it can never be quite digressive enough: there are constraints and limits.⁹¹

In critical terms, this reflection is often encapsulated by a single term that both addresses Prince’s definition as well as being intimately related to the technique of counting in its full historical breadth and the realm of numeracy: *economy*. It is in the perception of the vague notion of an *economy of the text* that the possibilities and limits of a system of writing that, as Bayard would say, claims discontinuity as a major aesthetic principle become clearer, and yet, even more troubling.

⁹⁰ Gerald Prince. *A Dictionary of Narratology*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987, p. 56.

⁹¹ Ross Chambers. *Loiterature*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999, p. 32.

Before anything else, we should note that the form of the list is indelibly linked to the techniques of financial practice and economic activity *per se*: whether these are stock markets, ledgers, payment slips, etc., the list form dominates the operations of the financial, economic, statistical, fields. To return to the aforementioned relationship between the first forms of counting and natural events and processes in Mesopotamia, one notes also how some of the earliest financial technologies, such as the invention of financial interest, are indissociable from the formalisation of the technique of the list as an accumulative practice concerned with an accurate depiction of the world: just as financial interest reproduces and is inspired by the multiplicative and generative essence of the natural world,⁹² so does the list as a mode of register concerned with accumulation and generation of ‘things’ becomes an obvious technique to represent such the world as a place of cycles and growth. In other words, if “narrative (..) is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change,”⁹³ it is not the only one.

In a second sense of the word, listing is also a practical and common way to economise writing; not to register the passage of time but to *save* it. In their ubiquitous presence in daily use, we list topics of conversation in meetings, rather than whole chains of arguments, or perhaps we produce a list that we intend to reuse or turn into a narrative at a later point when writing a draft of a work, as Jules Verne often did.⁹⁴ A list of the second type might even be understood as proto-

⁹² “Across the ancient world the etymologies of interest derive from the offspring of livestock. The Sumerian word for interest, *mas*, signifies a kid goat (or lamb). The ancient Egyptian equivalent *ms* means to give birth. In ancient Greek interest is *tokos*, a calf. Among the several Hebrew words for interest are *marbit* and *tarbit*, meaning to increase and multiply. The Latin for interest, *foenus*, connotes fertility, and for money, *pecunia*, is derived from *pecus*, a flock. Our word capital comes from *caput*, a head of cattle. (...) A connection between nature’s productivity and interest was suggested by nineteenth-century German economist Karl Arnd, who claimed that the interest rate was regulated by ‘the proportion, in which the timber in European forests is augmented through their annual growth ... at the rate of 3 or 4 to 100. As a result interest in these countries cannot fall below that rate.’ In similar vein, Irving Fisher writes that ‘Nature is, to a great extent, reproductive. Growing crops and animals often make it possible to endow the future more richly than the present. Man can obtain from the forest or the farm more by waiting than by premature cutting of trees or by exhausting the soil. In other words, Nature’s productivity has a strong tendency to keep up the rate of interest.’” Edward Chancellor. *The Price of Time: The Real Story of Interest*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2022. eBook.

⁹³ David Herman. *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p. 2.

⁹⁴ Gaspard Turin. “Imaginaire génétique: la critique face à la liste chez Jules Verne.” *Genesis* 47 (2018), pp. 53-66.

narrative, in the sense by which it prepares a narrative-to-be⁹⁵ – this second stage of the writing process being understood as more laborious and time-consuming.

A closer relation between this second understanding of economy, and the list and its innate discontinuities also lies where the impetus to economise writing clashes with a naturally digressive discourse: again, as Bayard observes, to eliminate digressions – which is, to a degree, the same gesture as recognising them as such – is also to attend to “moyens plus économiques.”⁹⁶ Sandquist, once again, labels catalogues as “blocks in the narrative economy,”⁹⁷ as does Turin (“elle pose problème à l’économie narrative”⁹⁸). If the whole ‘system,’ or mode, relies on digressive discontinuity, it distorts those more traditional – often seemingly more commonsensical – approaches to the literary organisation of reality as dependant on the ability to identify and separate what is trivial and what is “worthy of being told.” In this context, the poetic list becomes a subsidiary, self-contradictory, form to the two sides of ‘economy’: an extreme case of an accumulative practice bent on faithfully registering the world’s multitude and yet incapable of remediating its own increasing sense of redundancy.

The ensuing sense of disquiet concerning the effect that such a mode of discourse has on literature (and, more gravely, what this literature has to say about the world) will then often serve as the premise for the critique of the texts analysed in the following chapters: often, their authors are accused of redundancy, evasiveness, artlessness, etc. Despite the diversity of this critique, we can summarise its most important aspect with an eloquent excerpt from Czesław Miłosz’s *Native Realm*, in which he writes that “there is nothing degrading in our fundamental inability to lay base *all the particulars* of our fate,” because, he continues,

⁹⁵ Brian Richardson. *Op. cit.*, p. 339.

⁹⁶ Pierre Bayard. *Op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁹⁷ Brigitte L. Sandquist. *Loc. cit.*

⁹⁸ Gaspard Turin. *Entre hybris et mélancolie: poétique, esthétique et usages de la liste littéraire dans le roman français contemporain (1963-2013)*. 2014. Université de Lausanne. PhD Dissertation. *Serval: serveur académique lausannois*. <serval.unil.ch/resource/serval:BIB_B3266248B812.P001/REF>, p. 10.

[i]f it were any different, if that chaotic richness, in the presence of which our faculties are like a lantern of light in the darkness, did not exist, we would not constantly be aspiring to form achieved by a process of elimination, and probably *the art of writing would disappear*.⁹⁹

The ‘problem’ of the list, as identified by some, concerns the problem of a literature which apparently defines itself *against* an aspiration to “form achieved by a process of elimination” – a process naturally concerned with the economy of the writing form and its emphasis on locating the digression, on separating the trivial from the essential, and finding therein Prince’s “narratable.” The list, instead, is often understood as an aspiration to the possibility of producing literary writing by a process of accumulation, unbounded by or merely seemingly unconcerned with the *realpolitik* (it is indeed in the threatening nature of a zero-sum game that Miłosz presents it) of the *artifice* of literature – simply put, the fact that writing requires making choices about what is or is not written.

The threatened “art of writing,” however, carries some nuances that should not go unmentioned. In the first place, it refers to writing itself, that is, the mere existence of something written, writing for which an endpoint was conceived, *writing that can be read*. Such was not exactly the case, for example, of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, and even, in a milder sense, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*: both are products of ceaseless accumulation and thus of a kind of ‘writing’ which always hints at the danger of never ending and thus never concreting in a ‘final product’ ready for reading. Thomas Browne kept adding to his encyclopaedia, making necessary the printing of new editions which rendered the previous ones obsolete, and Flaubert kept adding material to a future book, never published in his life. In both cases, the definitive text is forever delayed, with endless accumulation prised in its stead. The process of elimination becomes unavoidable: in rather crude terms, because the author was seemingly unconcerned with it, the publication and reading of

⁹⁹ Czesław Miłosz. *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition*. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1981, p. 5. My emphasis.

Bouvard depended ultimately on the elimination of the authorial persona himself. Death, in a crude rephrasing of Benjamin, sanctions the story.¹⁰⁰

In a second meaning, the “art” of writing is in danger of disappearing but not because writing as an activity is threatened in any way – this perception of the danger of the disappearance of the art of writing is unique in the sense that it is the consequence of writing more, not less. It should thus be reframed not as the disappearance of writing (or “art of writing” as referring to the universe that includes the cultural practices of writing, publishing, editing, reading, storing, etc.) but rather as the disappearance of the artifice (the technique) of writing: *the art in the art of writing*. The artificial techniques of selection, *caesura*, elimination, and filtering, open the doors to art in ways that simple blind register (such as the scribo- and graphomania of the mystic¹⁰¹) cannot, Miłosz implies. The “chaotic richness” of the Real must somehow succumb to the ordering of the Imaginary, otherwise, where is the artfulness? Should it not lie somewhere where the readerly contract assumes a choice of what was worthy to write in the first place?

The substance of Miłosz’s observation on the conditions of (and for) literature meets the characteristics of the list as a technique of counting in what redounds as a common and seemingly inescapable source of criticism: often the list is received as technique-less form. Of course, as Bayard observed, digression is never an absolute category, but always relational,¹⁰² and our analysis in the following sections will dive deeper into the historical, cultural, and personal contexts that frame the conditions for perceived digressiveness in each list. Yet, there emerges a common theme that, when placed before these texts, the reader is not before the “art of writing” but something like Chambers’ “loiterature”: writing as mindless babbling, loitering, the proliferation of the trivial, digressive, wasteful, purposeless – even, to some, offensive.

¹⁰⁰ Walter Benjamin. “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov.” *Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935-1938*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002, p. 151.

¹⁰¹ Which is why these modes of discourse so often redound in list-making. See Bernardo Ferreira. *Op. cit.*

¹⁰² “l’enjeu n’est pas de savoir s’il y a une digression *en soi*, mais si, dans le contexte particulier de production et de réception qu’invente l’esthétique d’une œuvre, tel passage peut être apprécié comme tel, ou, si l’on préfère, est nécessaire ou pas.” Pierre Bayard. *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

After a list in *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf writes: “it is an effect lists have upon us—we are beginning to yawn. But if we stop, it is only because the catalogue is tedious, not that it is finished.”¹⁰³ Far from being an uncommon position, Woolf’s comment reflects an understanding of the role of the list which has often found echoes: that the list constitutes, in itself, an unavoidable estrangement from the text and the act of reading – the mode of the list itself as a digression. Barney, for example, writes that “at worst, when a writer halts his narrative to make a list of things, he merely desperately pads;”¹⁰⁴ of “Homeric Battle Narrative and Catalogues,” Beye considers them “alien to narrative,” adding that the “battle list seems to be a thing apart from the general dramatic narrative, often introduced in a way seemingly so consciously artificial as to set the passage very definitely off to itself;”¹⁰⁵ or Richardson’s suggestion that “lists generally produce a much more pronounced break than, say, descriptive passages,” forcing “a break in the transmission of the narrative proper.”¹⁰⁶

Even at a material level, lists are often signalled by some form of break: comma, full stop, paragraph, decoration, separators, pages, white spaces, etc. Such visual and material discontinuities underline or preview the conceptual discontinuity grounding the mode of the list, and its ‘otherness’ in relation to “proper” literature. Indeed, Richardson suggests that lists “are essential elements in other areas as well.” What we propose to analyse in the following sections is precisely that these “other areas” are self-evident in the texts and the themes that their lists propose to represent. Or, in other words, this ‘otherness’ is mutually addressing: the digressive qualities of the list suit the digressive nature of the themes and allow for their faithful and accurate representation.

¹⁰³ Virginia Woolf. *Orlando: A Biography*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1978, p. 101. Incidentally, both Orlando and Woolf were readers of Thomas Browne.

¹⁰⁴ Stephen A. Barney. *Op. cit.*, p. 189.

¹⁰⁵ Charles Rowan Beye. *Op. cit.*, p. 345.

¹⁰⁶ Brian Richardson. *Op. cit.*, p. 328.

We might start by noticing that every single one of the works in our *corpus* is presented as and constitutes a form of digression from (a) life: Thomas Browne only writes when he is not occupied with his regular medical work (“composed by snatches of time, as medical vacations, and the fruitless importunity of Uroscopy would permit us”¹⁰⁷); Sei Shōnagon relates the origin of *The Pillow Book* as a kind of digression from the literary work being done in the court of the emperor; *Moby-Dick* relates an adventure which begins in a clear effort to digress from a dull life at shore (“it came as a sort of brief interlude and solo between more extensive performances”¹⁰⁸); *Invisible Cities* describes the two characters’ gradual abandonment of their duties as ambassador and monarch (and moreover, both *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Cities*, because they ground this break on the condition of melancholy, are also digressive in the sense that Arthur W. Frank writes that “disease interrupts a life, and illness then means living with perpetual interruption,” adding that “telling an interrupted life requires a new kind of narrative.”¹⁰⁹); and *Bouvard et Pécuchet*’s ‘plot’ consists, similarly, of a break from professional life into a constant digressive state of dilettantism in the countryside. And yet, in all instances, what we are faced with is not the irruption of the tellable, narratable, extra-ordinary but rather its opposite: themes that resist both narration and – indulging in endless digression and yet insisting on their centrality as *tellable things*, of writing as declaration of interest – claim the strange hybrid status of *essential triviality*.

Eva von Contzen (after commenting on the ways by which lists “challenge our reading habits because they break open the sequential flow of the narrative”) argues that the reliance on a deep effect on affect (that lists are boring, challenging, etc) renders experientiality a “crucial category” for analysing lists, here in Monika Fludernik’s sense of a “quasi-mimetic evocation of ‘real-life experience’.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, we argue that the particular subjects to which we now turn – utopias,

¹⁰⁷ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ *Moby-Dick*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁹ Arthur W. Frank. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997, pp. 56, 58.

¹¹⁰ Eva von Contzen. “Experience, Affect, and Literary Lists.” *Partial Answers* 16.2 (2018), pp. 316. See also Monika Fludernik. *Towards a Natural Narratology*. London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 12 and 20-5.

friendship, melancholy – share a key element that makes them amenable to be listed for the reasons sketched above, namely, that of requiring the *representation* as “quasi-mimetic evocations” of things which are not essential but trivial, and yet deriving meaning from their existential status necessarily (*essentially*) as trivialities. In all cases, the natural relationship between the list form, discontinuity, and the impression of digressiveness, will be fully deployed in order to accurately account for what cannot, should not, or would not be amenable to narrative treatment¹¹¹ – those aspects of human life and reality which would otherwise be excluded from literary treatment, but to which the list allows literary representation. In the texts’ recourse to the variety of techniques of listing we present here, they find the right set of tools to continue to aspire to *an* art of writing, even if it should often arrive with a sense of estrangement or disquiet as if we would chance upon a unicorn in an otherwise reasonable garden.

Without further ado, the following sections are divided into three groups of texts and three corresponding technologies of the list. *The Pillow Book* and *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* are analysed as instances of the inventory list and as politically motivated utopias; *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is compared to the double-lists of Venetian merchants’ double-entry bookkeeping ledgers as equivalent to the literary representation of friendship; and *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Cities* are considered as possible itineraries, concerned with the representation and exploration of travel and curiosity as cures for melancholy.

¹¹¹ To make a callback to Robin categories of the “unnarratable.”

I.1. The Wanderer and the Carriage: Politics and Digressions in two Inventories

Admittedly these are trifles, but these trifles mean a great deal to me, and I am incapable of passing over these trivialities. Besides which, I don't really consider anything trivial.

— Robert Walser

Spirit of the Bazar: Defining the Inventory

In attempting to begin by offering a definition of inventory, it becomes clear that the term is far more complex and carries a greater number of contradictions than some other list forms. As one of the outcomes of listing, the inventory is particularly close to the descriptive mode – tasked with description, one often lists, so Hamon discerningly observed. Descriptions often concern the realm of visible things or, passing over the tautology, of what is broadly understood as describable – and so do inventories.¹¹² If with “inventories” we associate spaces and objects therein, their ‘describability’ would similarly concern what Hamon termed as “le regard descripteur,” in which “la description doit être sentie comme tributaire d’une compétence du personnage délégué à la vision, personnage focalisateur.”¹¹³ There is in the inventory a sense of worldliness absent from a number of other forms of listing – it requires place and things *seen* or, at the very least, a sensoriality of place, as in Patrick Süskind’s long inventory of smells.

Allowing some latitude to the term, we can equate Eco’s “museum catalogue” to this type of listing technique – after all the catalogue of the museum is an inventory of (some of) its contents, or, Eco writes, “an example of a practical list which refers to objects that exist in a predetermined place, and [that], as such, it is necessarily finite.”¹¹⁴ Again, the notion of a space which already exists (“predetermined”) and offers itself up for a register filtered by the sensorial, embodied perception of its list maker is part of a natural understanding of inventory: we understand its

¹¹² “Voir, notamment, les liens privilégiés du descriptif avec la confection des listes pragmatiques, des inventaires juridiques.” Phillipe Hamon. *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹¹³ *Idem*, p. 172.

¹¹⁴ Umberto Eco. *Op. cit.*, p. 165.

technique as fundamentally descriptive rather than prescriptive, past and present (and to *what is present*) oriented rather than to the future. In this conflict between rigidity and fluidity, between the predetermined place and “le regard,” the inventory list finds its expressive dimensions.

We glean an additional creative aspect to the technique of the inventory if we attend to etymology. Like *invention* or *to invent*, *inventory* traces its roots to the Latin *invenire*, a verb which could be translated as *to find*, *to come upon*. Here, inventory still carries that spatial undertone but its cognate reveals an additional imaginative component: it is the ‘invented’ world which one comes upon, a simultaneous act of discovery and creation. There also remains a sense that the inventory is something one moves through, that in it the time of writing and the time of experience coincide – a temporal dimension which Hamon also underlined. This creativity is hard to dissociate from the requirement of involving a witness-creator; we return to Hamon’s “personnage” to whom *all* the competencies of *invenire* – finding as well as inventing – are to be delegated.

In effect, we would do well to preemptively dispel the notion that the technique of the list of the inventory should have a privileged claim to “pre-determined” truth. At least to the historian, as Fernand Braudel would put it, inventories appear to have an unmediated relationship to reality, as if they could be “documents de vérité”¹¹⁵ and not inventions. It might well be that the apparent operational simplicity of this type of list contributes to what is the illusion of its status as nothing but practical – the same sensibility is found in Eco: the catalogue is finite because the museum’s objects are too. Yet, as Giorgio Riello underlines in his analysis of (very practical) probate inventories, inventories, like any other cultural technique, are “neither uncontaminated records of an objective reality, nor simple literary manifestations divorced from materiality,”¹¹⁶ but rather filled with “fictional elements” aimed at presenting a particular view of physical space.¹¹⁷ Eco’s

¹¹⁵ Fernand Braudel. *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme, XV^e-XVIII^e siècle, Vol 1, Les structures du quotidien: le possible et l'impossible*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1979, p. 245.

¹¹⁶ Giorgio Riello. “‘Things Seen and Unseen’: The Material Culture of Early Modern Inventories and Their Representation of Domestic Interiors.” *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500-1800*. Oxon: Routledge, 2013, p. 127.

¹¹⁷ *Idem*, p. 135.

“predetermined place” is also the object of reinvention, and an invented museum resides in the inventory, distinct from the real museum; lists of objects are never merely practical (nor merely descriptive), although they might appear deceptively so.

What remains is something closer to what Leo Spitzer might have had in mind when he pointed to, in the midst of the appearance of the nineteenth-century institution of the department store, the proliferation of a particular kind of list, infused with a “espíritu de bazar.” Poetic imagination and the faculty of sight come together in his summary of a style

que acerca violentamente unas a otras las cosas más dispares (...) como un niño que estuviera hojeando el catálogo de una gran tienda y anotando en desorden los artículos que el azar pusiera bajo su vista ; pero un niño que, siendo además sabio y poeta, extrajera poesía y pensamiento de una lista de áridas palabras; un niño genial¹¹⁸

This fragment is particularly illuminating, offering us what I believe is the best set of tools to examine the technique of the inventory. I single out four main points, condensing the various discussions quoted above: 1) the importance of sight and the physicality of being faced with the inventory (“hojeando”, “bajo su vista”); 2) the importance of objects, of *things as things*, which the inventory prises (“cosas”, “artículos”); 3) the role of chance which allows one *to come upon* the unexpected (“anotando en desorden”, “el azar pusiera”); 4) and finally, and more importantly, the fragile relation between a fabricated *innocent triviality* and the spark of genius which elevates the inventory beyond simple “arid” register and into the realm of invention. The interplay between these four elements in *The Pillow Book* and *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* constitutes the focus of the analysis in the present chapter. Naturally, department stores are very far from the cultural and material realities of Thomas Browne or Sei Shōnagon. And yet, their invented literary worlds are akin to other real spaces where collections of objects might compel one to register them – and to take those spaces as metaphorical possibilities ripe for poetic (re)invention. In many ways, these

¹¹⁸ Leo Spitzer. *Op. cit.*, p. 26.

two authors behave like Spitzer's image of the young poet, the *niño genial*: looking, registering, and inventing.

This chapter proposes a comparative reading of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* and *The Pillow Book* as two inventories of place: Browne's imagined museum of curiosities of seventeenth-century popular errors, and Shōnagon's imagined fantasy of the palace and court of disgraced Empress Teishi. In both cases, the inventory serves the purpose of furnishing a spatial concreteness to an idealised place besieged by external censorial forces, be it the religious and iconoclastic puritanism of the British *Interregnum* which Browne laboured against, or the Heian crisis of succession which would eventually leave Shōnagon disgraced in political exile. The technique of digression is, in both texts, fully marshalled as an integral component of list making, simultaneously serving to make philosophical and political arguments, as well as allowing its writers to imagine and traverse places and texts with a unique freedom which would have been barred to them both in their external lives as well as in other literary forms – a simultaneously political and poetic sleight of hand.

Lost and Found: Historical and Cultural Contexts

The nineteenth-century institutions of the museum or department store are not the only models for the inventory – its poetic genealogy is often traced to Noah, the first collector, his ark the first collection.¹¹⁹ The comparison carries some auspicious notions, the most significant of which concerns the relationship manifested in the inventory between the destruction and mourning of a lost world and the anticipation and creation of the next – the intimate relationship between memory, loss, and inventory could be traced all the way to Simonides' story as retold by Cicero in *De Oratore*.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ See Claire Preston. *Thomas Browne and the Writing of Early Modern Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 99; Susan Stewart. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996, p. 152.

¹²⁰ Frances Yates. *The Art of Memory*. London. Pimlico, 1994, p. 17.

While inventories often concern lost things,¹²¹ the inventory's loss always carries its reverse: the nostalgic and the anticipatory mode are twinned in the logic of invention of the inventory – Noah's ark concerns a destroyed world just as much as it does a renewed one. It is through its *recollection* of what has no form anymore that its world-making possibilities, the finding of new forms, open up. Reflecting on the ambiguity underlined by this biblical heritage, Susan Stewart thus writes that the function of the collection, despite its face half-turned to the past,

is not the restoration of context of origin but rather the creation of a new context, a context standing in a metaphorical, rather than contiguous, relation to the world of everyday life. (...) The collection presents a hermetic world: to have a representative collection is to have both the minimum and the complete number of elements necessary for *an autonomous world*.¹²²

The descriptive is always the prescriptive – such inventories are invented new worlds.¹²³ Moreover, the technique is fully deployed in the maintenance of the quality of *autonomy*, that is the rhetorical qualities of the mode of discourse of the list of the inventory that contribute to the verisimilitude, the legitimacy, of what is represented. Before focusing on an analysis of the techniques involved in the creation of these new contexts (or, to keep the terminology, in inventing these autonomous worlds), it is thus necessary to turn our attention to the “context of origin” of Browne or Shōnagon: what worlds were lost and mourned, and what the inventorying of their contents hoped to erect in the same place. If their inventories are also political arguments – as I propose – it is then important to briefly outline the politics that were in place.

Thomas Browne's “Hopefull Dominion of Truth”

¹²¹ Contemporary literature has, across different genres, a penchant for this facet of inventories: Henri Lefebvre's *Les Unités Perdues*, Judith Schalansky's *An Inventory of Losses*, Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi* are some examples.

¹²² Susan Stewart. *Loc. cit.* My emphasis.

¹²³ To make up a world not by recounting stories set therein but by inventorying its items is now a recognised literary genre: Milorad Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars*, or Han Shaogong's *A Dictionary of Maqiao* comprise two celebrated cases of a practice which traces its lineage also to Jorge Luis Borges, namely, to the short story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, published in 1940, with its secret sect whose conjuring of the world of Uqbar requires, principally, the fashioning of an encyclopaedia titled simply *Tlön*.

It was Walter Pater who most eloquently underlined the relationship between a certain melancholy aura of death in Browne's *œuvre*, and the nature of the museum as a place of mourning and renovation:

To many, certainly, Browne's [life] would have seemed too like a lifelong following of one's own funeral. A museum is seldom a cheerful place — oftenest induces the feeling that nothing could ever have been young ; and to Browne the whole world is a museum ; all the grace and beauty it has being of a somewhat mortified kind. Only, for him (...), there was the perpetual flicker of a surviving spiritual ardency, one day to reassert itself.¹²⁴

Browne's apparent discretion has "allowed us to forget" that he chose to write and publish most of his *œuvre* (apart from the unintentionally released *Religio Medici*) during one of the most turbulent periods of English history. By the time he penned the first revision of *Pseudodoxia* in 1658, the century "had seen two civil wars, a regicide, and an experiment in republican government."¹²⁵ The rise of print and polemical writing had further lessened the distance between politics and literature: at all levels of discourse, writes Steven N. Zwicker, "this was a nation entangled by polemic, splintered by religious dissent, riven by partisanship."¹²⁶ And to those, like the Anglican moderate Thomas Browne, who abhorred war and conflict,¹²⁷ the "major problem confronting the critical intelligence of the age" was that of reconciliation.¹²⁸ What was perceived as a decline unto barbarity led writers and philosophers towards an emphatic concern with the existential conditions of their country, to use "the systems of communication at their disposal –

¹²⁴ Walter Pater. *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style*. London: Macmillan, 1924, pp. 137-8.

¹²⁵ Anne Cotterill. *Op. cit.*, pp. 132-4.

¹²⁶ Steven N. Zwicker. *Lines of Authority: Politics and English Literary Culture, 1649-1689*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 9.

¹²⁷ And who had suffered personally the effects of violent partisanship. Norwich, a centre of Puritan resistance, was routinely subjected to arbitrary tax collection for the war effort, martial law, and persecution of supporters of the royalist cause. Browne's writings record two instances of a more intimate interaction with the effects of radical politics: his dismay at the destruction of the local cathedral, and his outrage (which led him to be signatory to a written protest) at the removal of the bishop Joseph Hall, his friend and patient. Jeremiah S. Finch. *Sir Thomas Browne: A Doctor's Life of Science and Faith*. New York: Collier Books, 1961, p. 101-112.

¹²⁸ Basil Willey. *The Seventeenth-Century Background: Studies in the Thought of the Age in Relation to Poetry and Religion*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 58.

above all, letter writing and print – to bring new public worlds into existence.”¹²⁹ The Republic of Letters – of which Browne was an active and respected member – thus fashioned itself also around a utopian impulse, “an articulation not simply of criticism within the commonweal but of alternative social and political orders.”¹³⁰

This chorographic impulse took many forms, most of which are reflected in *Pseudodoxia* in some way or another. Texts such as Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1626), Samuel Hartlib’s *A Description of the Famous Kingdome of Macaria* (1641), or Margaret Cavendish’s *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-World* (1666), are concrete manifestations of this utopian strain. No less important was the millenarianist obsession traversal to English society, from Puritan radicals to moderates such as Browne. In his work, millenarianism is directly connected to the mode of the list, for it underlines the eschatological function of cataloguing and inventorying in restoring a lost pre-lapsarian order which sought to gather everything scattered in chaos and prepare it for a final moment in which multiplicity would again be reunited in God.¹³¹ Other, more contained, musings, could address a lost Britain,¹³² as in John Evelyn’s desire, expressed in a letter to the Norwich physician, for an *Elysium Britannicum* in which a “society of the *Paradisi Cultores* (...) of learned and ingenious men, such as Dr. Browne, by whome we might hope to redeeme the tyme that has bin lost,” stands in contrast with those “brutish and ambitious persons [who] seeke themselves in the ruines of our miserable yet dearest country.”¹³³ And finally, others (again, Browne included), leaned on the imagery of the discoveries and the Americas to think a “projection of *Englishness* into

¹²⁹ Anthony Grafton. *Worlds Made by Words: Scholarship and Community in the Modern West*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009, p. 1.

¹³⁰ Steven N. Zwicker. *Op cit.*, p. 10.

¹³¹ We thus read in *The Garden of Cyrus*, that “All things began in order, so shall they end, and so shall they begin again; according to the ordainer of order and mystical Mathematicks of the City of Heaven.” “Given the occasion of disorder at that time,” writes Frank L. Huntley, “Browne could hope in 1658 that in God’s time and by God’s method order would be restored even though this might require the millennium.” Frank L. Huntley. “The Garden of Cyrus as Prophecy.” *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne: The Ann Arbor Tercentenary Lectures and Essays*. C. A. Patrides (ed.). Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1982, p. 142. Less sympathetic to the sectarian, millenarianist, puritan radicals, Browne preferred “to imagine a sort of cosmic housekeeping or spiritual tidiness,” rather than any catastrophic or destructive event. Claire Preston. *Op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹³² In the shakespearean tradition of John of Gaunt’s monologue in *Richard II*.

¹³³ John Evelyn. “181. John Evelyn, Esq. to Dr. Browne.” 28 January 1695/60. *Works* IV, p. 275.

foreign and inhospitable places,”¹³⁴ urged on by the reflection of Englishness at home. Browne’s ambiguous American imagery (the Americas are, in *Pseudodoxia*, the “untraveller parts of Truth”¹³⁵) conforms to the early modern discourse of discovery as “a powerful register of the characteristic claims and limits of European representational practice,” hesitant between the wonderful as “sign of dispossession” or “agent of appropriation.”¹³⁶

Thomas Browne’s *Pseudodoxia* is nourished by this eclectic imagination of lost and imagined places: the scientific and civil utopias of Bacon and Hartlib, the millenarianist impulse to restore lost order, the fascination with the exotic, the marvellous, the wonder, as well as the gentlemanly character of the private collection.¹³⁷ Accordingly, in the Letter to the Reader and indulging in Browne’s typical polyhedral thought, he makes use of all metaphors, only to arrive at his own “hopefull dominion of Truth.”¹³⁸ For in times of disagreement and dissent, what concerned Browne was the nature of truth itself, how people come to agree and disagree – how minor “errors” in painting, for example, can propagate and turn into violent iconoclasm and intellectual censorship.¹³⁹ A search for truth which would preserve peace, difference, and tolerance, and which could, above all, combat dogma – such was the lost world he hoped to restore in *Pseudodoxia*. For this reason, Browne’s encyclopaedia of mistakes must confront truth and error, travel between “Dictator-like”¹⁴⁰ opinions and the agreement of the community – always ambiguous, knowledge in *Pseudodoxia*

¹³⁴ Bruce Boehrer. *The Seventeenth-Century Literature Handbook*. Robert C. Evans, Eric J. Sterling (eds.). London: Continuum, 2010, p. 177.

¹³⁵ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 5.

¹³⁶ Stephen Greenblatt. *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. London: Clarendon, 1991, pp. 23-4.

¹³⁷ Claire Preston. *Op. cit.*, pp. 136-7. Many passages in Preston’s text confirm this quality of the private collection.

¹³⁸ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 5.

¹³⁹ “*Pseudodoxia*’s extensive and uniquely detailed book of pictures was produced in a culture whose obsession with, and occasional, phobia of, images led to intense conflict at both local and national levels.” Kevin Kileen. “The Politics of Painting: *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* and Iconoclasm.” *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed*. Reid Barbour and Claire Preston (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 189.

¹⁴⁰ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 6.

belongs to the realm of utopias: a “shared property of a group that is projected rather than existing.”¹⁴¹

Concerning its form, *Pseudodoxia* is shaped as an organised list, although Browne cautions in the Letter to the Reader that “we have endeavoured a long and serious *Adviso*; proposing not only a large and copious List, but from experience and reason attempting their decisions.”¹⁴² The list, in Browne’s times and opinion, was closely associated with practical classificatory techniques such as the double-entry bookkeeping of Luca Pacioli (see following chapter), which would have compelled him to perform acts of categorisation, of strictly separating truth from fact. In this sense, Browne’s thought can be traced to Bacon’s injunction in *The Advancement of Learning*, from which *Pseudodoxia* seems to have been almost programmatically lifted:

There are pertinent two points of much purpose (...) the first is, that there be made a kalendar, resembling an inventory of the estate of man, containing all the inventions (being the works of fruits of nature or art) which are now extant, and whereof man is already possessed; out of which doth naturally result a note, what things are yet held impossible, or not invented; (...) I advise be annexed another kalendar, as much or more material, which is a kalendar of popular errors: I mean chiefly in natural history, such as pass in speech and conceit, and are nevertheless apparently detected and convicted of untruth.¹⁴³

Browne’s work addresses both cases: in its content, it answers to Bacon’s second “kalendar.” Yet, in its temporal sensibility, it goes much further and incorporates a complex and ambiguous orientation towards the future, symptomatic of his double-sided scientific and eschatological sensibility. We should note that *Pseudodoxia* was written at a time when scientific and religious lists were often designed with a future-oriented sensibility in mind: on the one hand, the *desiderata*, lists of scientific inventions and things not yet discovered (Bacon’s first *kalendar*), multiplied, such as Robert Boyle’s, which stood also as “geographical targets, indicating the expanded borders of

¹⁴¹ William N. West. “Brownean Motion: Conversation within *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*’s ‘Somber Circumference of Knowledge’.” *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed*. Reid Barbour and Claire Preston (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 176.

¹⁴² *Pseudodoxia*, p. 3.

¹⁴³ Francis Bacon. *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, pp. 98-100.

knowledge's future empire.”¹⁴⁴ In millenarianist theology, on the other hand, the genre of “lists of last things” gave shape to the gradual and inevitable unfolding of apocalyptic history.¹⁴⁵ The subtlety of the *Adviso*, allows Browne to embrace the form of the list together with all kinds of discursive linings and ambiguities, to adopt a non-exclusionary discourse that always wanders yet never conquers.

Sei Shōnagon's “Old days”

Like Thomas Browne, Shōnagon's world was characterised by the existence of a refined literate class and an intense – and equally refined – literary production, as well as being conditioned by a tortuous logic of dynastic succession and its associated political machinations. Her close proximity and intimate contact with the events and intervenients, however, justify a more granular look at the specificities of the Heian court and its crisis – besides its particular alienness to our (and Thomas Browne's) world.

The setting of *The Pillow Book* sits right at the end of the three-century rise and domination of the Fujiwara clan in the politics of the Heian period, between the years 794 and 1185. The height of Fujiwara power came during the regency of Michinaga Fujiwara, coinciding with the career at the court of Sei Shōnagon. Under Michinaga, the cultural life of the court was also at its most splendid: this setting – *The World of The Shining Prince*, in the words of Ivan Morris – marked also the severing of the traditional obeisance to Chinese aesthetic norms and a self-reflective and rich fostering of Japanese arts and literature.

The method by which the Fujiwara came to dominate the court rested on two principles, political and religious. Via shrewd intermarriage politics, the patriarch of the family cultivated and maintained a familial bond with the emperor. Michinaga himself represents the extreme success

¹⁴⁴ Vera Keller. “The ‘New World of Sciences’: The Temporality of the Research Agenda and the Unending Ambitions of Science.” *Isis* 103.4 (2012), p. 730.

¹⁴⁵ Richard W. Cogley. “Seventeenth-Century English Millenarianism.” *Religion* 17 (1987), pp. 379-96.

case of this strategy, having managed to become “father-in-law of two emperors, grandfather of a third, grandfather and great-grandfather of a fourth, grandfather and father-in-law of a fifth.”¹⁴⁶ Moreover, the Fujiwara cultivated the Buddhist custom of early abdication, according to which the emperor would spend no more than an average of thirty-one years in power. As a result Fujiwara regents often oversaw child rulers, who retired and took vows before they could become political threats.¹⁴⁷ These strategies crystallised, in Shōnagon’s days, into a competition for succession between the two brothers and rivals Michitaka and Michinaga Fujiwara, comprising two separate female courts: Teishi, first wife of Ichijō and Michitaka’s daughter, and Shōshi, Ichijō’s second consort and Michinaga’s daughter. Shōnagon was lady-in-waiting to Teishi while her literary rival, Murasaki Shikibu, the author of *The Tale of Genji*, lived in Shōshi’s court – the literary contest was also political from the start.

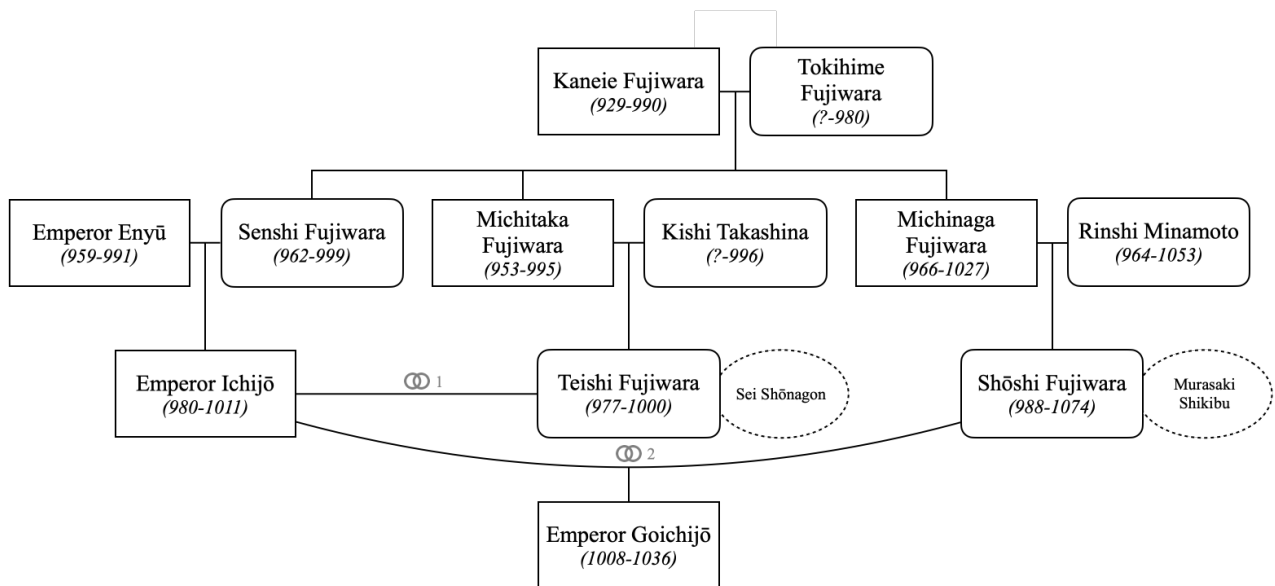


Fig. 1: Detail of Fujiwara family tree. Sei Shōnagon and her rival, Murasaki Shikibu, belonged to two distinct – competing – courts.

Michitaka’s death precipitated the decline of Teishi’s – and Shōnagon’s – fortunes. After taking tonsure, the sudden death of the empress only aggravated Shōnagon’s precarious situation; little is known about her life after these events. In a thirteenth-century document, we read a second-

¹⁴⁶ Ivan Morris. *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*. London: Penguin Books, 1997, p. 63.

¹⁴⁷ See, for an in-depth description of Fujiwara politics and rivalries during Shōnagon’s times, Ivan Morris. *Op. cit.*, pp. 67-75.

hand account of Shōnagon's life after leaving the court: lacking "anyone to rely on in her later years," she lives "far away in the countryside."

A person spotted Sei Shōnagon when she was outside drying some kind of "greens," and she was overheard mumbling to herself, "I cannot forget the court robes I saw in the days of old." She was wearing a lowly robe and a hat of patched cloths – how very sad.

Indeed, how she must have longed for the past.¹⁴⁸

However apocryphal, this conforms to the image that Shōnagon created in her work: likely written after the events had taken place, *The Pillow Book* presents us with an intensely refined and grandiose vision of Teishi's court outside of the scope and reach of the tragedy of historical contingency. As she herself notes, clarifying *The Pillow Book's* referent as a lost word, "these events, which seemed so splendid and auspicious at the time, all look very different when compared with the present, and this is why I've set it all down in detail, with heavy heart."¹⁴⁹ Shōnagon's is thus a work of anti-history, which can be read both as a denial of the events set in motion before her eyes (a denial of that very same motion, perhaps) and as an effort to "manipulate historical representation."¹⁵⁰ In the words of McKinney,

when we consider the sorrowful and increasingly tragic events that began to overwhelm Teishi and her court a mere two years after Sei Shōnagon arrived, we must be astonished that out of this could have come a work that not only refuses to acknowledge these sorrows, but that largely refuses to acknowledge even sorrow itself, and gives us instead in its place a world of exquisite delight.¹⁵¹

In *The Pillow Book*, Shōnagon created "a work that would redound to the credit of Teishi's court – a work conveying the brilliant wit, the exquisite taste and sheer 'delightfulness' for which that court had become known and which Sei Shōnagon was felt to epitomize."¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Naomi Fukumori. "Sei Shōnagon's *Makura no sōshi*: A Re-Visionary History." *The Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 31.1 (1997), p. 8.

¹⁴⁹ *The Pillow Book*, p. 230.

¹⁵⁰ *Idem*, p. 5.

¹⁵¹ Meredith McKinney. "Introduction." *The Pillow Book*. London: Penguin Books, 2006, p. xxiii.

¹⁵² *Idem*, p. xix.

The form of the inventory list comes as a direct response to historiographical thought: recalling the episode when she was gifted the pile of papers that would become her work, Shōnagon writes that the Emperor's court is copying *Records of the Historian*,¹⁵³ and that, as such, the Empress' court should attempt something completely different.¹⁵⁴ In the words of Naomi Fukumori:

Rather than drawing attention to the outside political forces that threaten the salon, Sei shifts her literary focus to less volatile conflicting or contrasting interplays which, transformed through wit and humor, help to create an aesthetic vision of harmony and refinement.¹⁵⁵

In *The Pillow Book*, Shōnagon recreates the court and palace environs by dutifully notating everything that was associated with its positive aesthetic ideals, manufacturing, via this inventory technique, a place of nostalgia outside of time.

Both Browne and Shōnagon wrote during times in which the power of literature was widely recognised and praised just as much as it was feared. Their impetus to the literary invention of better places leads us to subsume either Browne's "hopefull dominion of truth" or Shōnagon's Teishi's court under the rubric of literary *utopias* – which, as Lyman Tower Sargent cautions, are broader and older than the narrow western tradition of Thomas More:

In standard usage utopia is used both as defined here and as an equivalent for eutopia or a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived. (...) Literary utopias have at least six purposes, although they are not necessarily separable. A utopia can be simply a fantasy, it can be a description of a desirable or an undesirable society, an extrapolation, a warning, an alternative to the present, or a model to be achieved.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Also known as *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*, it was, by Shōnagon's days, a one-thousand-year-old foundational classic of Chinese history. This also points to another important aspect of Heian literary culture: because male writers were still largely tied to the Chinese traditions perceived as more noble, female writers were free to write in Japanese.

¹⁵⁴ *The Pillow Book*, p. 255.

¹⁵⁵ Naomi Fukumori. *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁵⁶ Lyman Tower Sargent. *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. eBook.

Browne and Shōnagon's proposed worlds fit in different measures several of the six listed purposes. Their main difference concerns their temporality: *The Pillow Book* presents a vision of an idealised past that highlights the problems of the present state of affairs and its inevitable decaying future, while *Pseudodoxia* focuses on the limitations of the present and the burdens of the past as obstacles in the path to a possible bright future. There is something already conservatively utopian, however, in the technique of the inventory, in the sense that they subjectively present – as Riello notes – “stable” versions of society in which the world of the “*sans feu, sans lieu, sans aveu* (...) is neglected.”¹⁵⁷ This stability marks indeed a permanent presence and unites the distinct temporal sensibilities of Shōnagon and Browne under the *aegis* of an aversion to any ideology of radical change and, in concrete political and sociological terms, a preference for stability and moderation. Again, it is the ambivalent interplay between this stability and the dynamic inventorier which animates the technique of the coming into of inventories, the *invenire* of the inventory.

The Body Comes Upon The List

The *invenire* of the inventory suggests an experience of presentiality highlighting various modes of embodiment: sight is a common *topos* used to generate lists. In the imagined places of *The Pillow Book* and *Pseudodoxia*, the mode of the list is often the result of an imagined or recalled interaction between the world of objects and the body as ‘uncoverer’ of said objects. As such, the senses and the body's presence ground a large portion of the terms of production of the items in these two lists. In other words, the technique of the inventory concerns mainly the imagination of movement and sensoriality – a mode of organising the world around an axis of its hierarchical and gradual *coming into* human experience.

¹⁵⁷ Giorgio Riello. *Op. cit.*, p. 136. Riello refers specifically to early modern listing practices, but this effect extends well into contemporary statistical list practices, as one *New Yorker* story illustrates. See Eric Lach. “Why Thousands of People Are Left Out of New York City's Daily Homeless Census.” 30 July 2022. *New Yorker*. <[newyorker.com/news/our-local-correspondents/why-thousands-of-people-are-left-out-of-new-york-citys-daily-homeless-census](https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-local-correspondents/why-thousands-of-people-are-left-out-of-new-york-citys-daily-homeless-census)>. Accessed 1 August 2022.

In Browne, the abundance of spatial metaphors available to the seventeenth-century's imagination allowed for a great variety of movement types, from the stroll through the museum, all the way to the exploration of the American wilderness. Accordingly, the Norwich doctor frames the unfolding of his text and prose in terms of walking the spaces invented by *Pseudodoxia*. The famous example in the introductory note sets the tone: "We hope it will not be unconsidered, that we find no open tract, or constant manuduction in this Labyrinth; but are often fain to wander in the America and untravelled parts of Truth."¹⁵⁸ "The hopefull dominion of Truth" – at least its untravelled part – is presented as a place to be traversed, albeit in a wandering, labyrinthine, way.

The true weight of Browne's spatial or, better yet, architectural plans for his work is clear if we attend to the structure itself of *Pseudodoxia*. In Preston's words,

its contiguous hierarchical arrangements, like that of museum catalogues, alludes to the visual patterns of the museums themselves, so that the categorical distinction between a spatially arranged cabinet and a printed encyclopaedia or catalogue – the distinction in other words between words and things – becomes almost irrelevant.¹⁵⁹

Browne's wandering does not aim to be exactly in tandem with the notion of discovery associated with colonial America. Instead, the museum and the cabinet should be taken as the most evocative models for *Pseudodoxia* – particularly where its hierarchical contiguity is concerned. As Preston further underlines, "the projects and outcomes of these enterprises – in Browne's case, specifically the printed record of inquiry – should themselves simulate the intellectual order they seek to restore. It is from this last principle that we can derive a sense of *Pseudodoxia* as a literary artifact."¹⁶⁰ *Pseudodoxia* is designed as a parallel to contemporary museological spaces and conventions as the literary recreation of a space familiar to Browne and his readership.

¹⁵⁸ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 5.

¹⁵⁹ Claire Preston. *Op. cit.*, p. 120.

¹⁶⁰ *Idem*, p. 96

Other strong contemporary models grounded on spatial or diagrammatical linear contiguity are also reminiscent of Browne's arrangement: in its "room by room" logic, for example, *Pseudodoxia* might evoke the genre convention of the contemporary "English model" of probate inventories.¹⁶¹ Its implied cosmology, on the other hand, is similar to the pre-Darwinian theories of the organisation of the universe along a "great chain of being,"¹⁶² which would have inventoried the entirety of Creation. In any case, and even more so when considering the intellectual weight that such images might have had on *Pseudodoxia*¹⁶³ (the great chain of being is here particularly noteworthy), Browne's book is "a textual cabinet of curiosities,"¹⁶⁴ in which even the division between naturals and artificials characteristic of cabinets is respected – man, at the middle, always perceived as the hybrid "amphibian."¹⁶⁵

This similarity, however, goes beyond a vague and not always concomitant association between the text's structure and its model. Instead, it is often the experience of being *in* the museum and the sensual pleasures it brings that Browne aims to evoke and which gives context to the inscription of new items into this list. His text is not only a description of the contents of a museum but also of the kind of experiences one should expect when observing its cabinets. In some cases, this might arise not out of a proposal of an imagined movement of the observer but of things observed, by a process not unlike Elaine Scarry's "radiant ignition." The imagined world's

¹⁶¹ "The drawing up of an inventory," Riello notes, "followed widely accepted rules." The English model was one of several regional and national conventions. See Giorgio Riello. *Op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹⁶² S. L. Bethell describes the general Elizabethan model of the chain of being, echoing *Pseudodoxia*'s structure: "Another picture – for thought on these matters was largely symbolical or diagrammatic – contributed much to the Elizabethan understanding of the universe: that of the 'vast chain of being'. (...) First comes the inanimate class, the lowest in the chain, where, nevertheless, 'there is a vast difference of virtue; water is nobler than earth, the ruby than the topaz, gold than brass'. (...) Second, then, is the vegetative class (existence and life); third the sensitive existence (existence, life and feeling), which is graded internally according to the number of faculties possessed. Next comes man at the nodal point, summing up all the qualities of being below and above himself (he is thus the microcosm or little world), possessing his own special attribute of discursive reason, and sharing also in the intellectual endowment of the angels, the various orders of the heavenly hierarchy, which are ranged above him and complete the chain." in S. L. Bethell. *The Cultural Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*. London: Dennis Dobson, 1963, pp. 40-1.

¹⁶³ "For there is in this Universe a Staire, or manifest Scale of creatures, rising nor disorderly, or in confusion, but with a comely method and proportion." *Religio Medici*, p. 43.

¹⁶⁴ Claire Preston. *Op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁶⁵ "We are onely that amphibious piece between a corporal and spiritual Essence, that middle form that links those two together, and makes good the Method of God and Nature, that jumps not from extrems, but unites the incompatible distances by some middle and participating natures." *Religio Medici*, p. 44.

vividness is here a product of the manipulation and listing of museum objects as sources of light and their impressions on the observer:¹⁶⁶

It is wonderful what variety of colours the spirits of Saltpeter, and especially, if they be kept in a glass while they pierce the sides thereof; I say, what Orient greens they will project (...) and common *Aqua fortis* will in some green and narrow mouthed glasses, about the verges thereof, send forth a deep and Gentianella blew.¹⁶⁷

More common is the sense of presence achieved by reference to the performative and ludic dimensions of the social aspect of the scientific experiment – unsurprisingly, *Pseudodoxia* is filled to the brim with detailed descriptions of concrete experiments and observations.¹⁶⁸ The experiment – particularly in the context of seventeenth-century debate on the epistemic nature of observation and proof¹⁶⁹ – appeals directly to the imagination of the senses and to an argument of presence and physical witnessing. In *Pseudodoxia*, however, Browne often eschews any concern for detail, scientificity, or the argumentative power of method, and simply lays experiments out in list form as if they were carried out in a flurry in front of us:

Thus, although it be true that the string of a Lute or Viol will stir upon the stroak of an Unison or Diapazon in another of the same kind; that Alcanna being green, will suddenly infect the nails and other parts with a durable red; that a Candle out of a Musket will

¹⁶⁶ Elaine Scarry. *Dreaming by the Book*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 77-88.

¹⁶⁷ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 480.

¹⁶⁸ On glowworms: “For when they are dead they shine not, nor alwaies while they live; but are obscure or light, according to the protrusion of their luminous parts, as observations will instruct us. (...) Now this light, as it appeareth and disappeareth in their life, so doth it go quite out at their death. As we have observed in some, which preserved in fresh grass have lived and shined eighteen days; but as they declined, and the luminous humor dried, their light grew languid, and at last went out with their lives.” *Pseudodoxia*, p. 262. See also Gordon Keith Chalmers. “Sir Thomas Browne, True Scientist.” *Osiris* 2 (1936), pp. 28-79.

Samuel Johnson’s biography of Browne relates an amusing episode illustrating Browne’s unique scientific industriousness: “He appears, indeed, to have been willing to pay labour for truth. Having heard a flying rumour of sympathetick needles, by which, suspended over a circular alphabet, distant friends or lovers might correspond, he procured two such alphabets to be made, touched his needles with the same magnet, and placed them upon proper spindles: the result was, that when he moved one of his needles, the other, instead of taking by sympathy the same direction, ‘stood like the pillars of Hercules.’ That it continued motionless, will be easily believed; and most men would have been content to believe it, without the labour of so hopeless an experiment. Browne might himself have obtained the same conviction by a method less operose, if he had thrust his needles through corks, and then set them afloat in two basons of water.” Samuel Johnson. “The Life of Sir Thomas Browne” in Thomas Browne. *The Major Works*. London: Penguin Books, 1977, p. 491.

¹⁶⁹ See Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer. *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, *passim*.

pierce through an Inch-board, or an urinal force a nail through a Plank; yet can few or none believe thus without a visible experiment.¹⁷⁰

The mode of the list is here used as a way to emphasise the accumulative burden of witnessed scientific proof without any reference to the experiments themselves or the scientific method. We are instead asked to imagine how it would feel to be *in* Browne's laboratory – to transpose the *hypotyposis* of the repetition of the scientific experiment to the *hypotyposis* of the list form: the inventory as a generator of facticity by an appeal to the imagination of presence. As Browne concedes in the last sentence, he knows this proposal goes beyond method. Yet, he also seems to believe or hope that the technique of inventory listing can evoke the benefits of sight and its *hypotypotical* argumentative power even when written items can never really be visible in the same sense. As, once again, Preston underlines, such an insistence on the gradual accumulation of the impression of things (usually by an appeal to the mind's eye), eschewing any argumentative or justificatory method, was a feature of cabinet logic, which sought "to recreate by spatial analogies the supposed likeness between things."¹⁷¹

This has deep implications for the structure of the typical Brownean argument. If we can conceive of a mode of persuasion which would work in a scientific, laboratorial, setting, Browne transposes that very same method to other realms:

For had he resisted, it had not been in the power of his aged parent to have enforced; and many at his years have performed such acts, as few besides at any. David was too strong for a Lion and a Bear; Pompey had deserved the name of Great; Alexander of the same cognomination was Generalissimo of Greece; and Anibal but one year after, succeeded Asdruball in that memorable War against the Romans.¹⁷²

Here, regarding the question of whether Isaac would have been old and strong enough to help Abraham or to resist him (and thus how should Isaac's youth be accurately depicted in pictures),

¹⁷⁰ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 545.

¹⁷¹ Claire Preston. *Op. cit.*, p. 104.

¹⁷² *Pseudodoxia*, p. 356.

Browne takes us through a series of examples whose argumentative relation to the main topic is left at the behest of the reader. This paradigmatic mode often redounds in circling examples, rarely concreting around any identifiable new objects. Depth is less desirable than the multiplicity of observable surfaces which the list excels at producing.

This paradigmatic and sensorial mode of knowledge acquisition – a surface logic – is a prevailing feature of Browne’s philosophy. To him, sight and truth are inextricable,¹⁷³ the former often standing as a metaphor for the latter: the esteemed William Harvey (pioneer of the field of embryology which so fascinated Browne) is an “ocular Philosopher” and thus “singular discloser of truth.”¹⁷⁴ Conversely, blindness is a symbol of ignorance: “an effect very strange,” he muses with some irony on the blindness of whelps, “and the cause of much obscurity, wherein as yet men’s inquiries are blind.”¹⁷⁵ It is a cardinal tenet of *Pseudodoxia* that it should, in order to correct mistakes, aid in the ability *to see*, albeit with a certain curious detachment – it should conjure a world of things experienced by the senses first, with reason as faithful assistant. Accordingly, one of his quibbles in the introduction is directed at those “Philologers and Critical Discourers, who look beyond the shell and obvious exterior of things.”¹⁷⁶ As he lists his inventory, it is precisely the *detached and wandering* eye of the curious museum visitor that Browne hopes to emulate. There is something of deep significance, he argues, in paying attention *only* to the visible surface, in presenting *things as things*. The epitaph chosen for the title page – a quote from the Italian physician Julius Caesar Scaliger – summarises his view well enough: “To cull from books what

¹⁷³ “Affording delightful Truths, confirmable by sense and ocular Observation, which seems to me the surest path, to trace the Labyrinth of Truth. For though discursive enquiry and rationally conjecture, may leave handsome gashes and flesh-wounds; yet without conjunction of this expect no mortal or dispatching blows unto error.” *The Garden of Cyrus*, p. 226.

¹⁷⁴ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 265.

¹⁷⁵ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 258.

¹⁷⁶ *Pseudodoxia*, pp. 5-6.

authors have reported is exceedingly dangerous; true knowledge of things themselves is out of the things themselves.”¹⁷⁷

In this interplay between the architectural stability of the inventory form and the flexible subjectivity of the coming-upon-it, the contours of Browne’s invitation to knowing a world through a very particular kind of body and movement take shape: although promising no manuduction in the labyrinth, *Pseudodoxia* is not as structurally labyrinthine as Browne would have us believe, nor there is no guidance at all. Instead, it is more like a carefully laid train track upon which we go along free to look around at anything we might fancy. Consequently, the rigid overarching museum-structure of *Pseudodoxia* and the dynamic presentation of its items constitute a dialectic structure whose tension is a feature of the inventory technique: “when the listing is room by room,” observes Riello, “inventories show the movement of the appraiser, the path followed through the building, and the way in which the built environment was seen and experienced by appraisers.”¹⁷⁸ The inventory requires a rigid space but re-creates it with the help of the inventorier’s freedom. These are not two distinct inventory lists, one ordered, the other chaotic, one stable the other unstable – the inventory conjures the stability of the “built environment” upon which the experience of the observer is reenacted.

Perhaps for this reason the most ardent appeals to a poetics of *invenire* come whenever digressive modes of traversal become themselves the subject, since these always refer to an appeal to subjective experience, to the wandering (i.e. productive) attention of the *inventorier* within the rigid physicality of the imagined museum. The mind (or rather, a community of minds) and its tortuous paths are where actual labyrinths reside:

(for besides that adventures in knowledge are laudable, and the assayes of weaker heads afford oftentimes improvable hints unto better) although in this long journey we miss the

¹⁷⁷ Thomas Browne. *The Major Works*. London: Penguin Books, 1977, p. 163. Geoffrey Keynes’ edition of Browne’s work does not have this epitaph.

¹⁷⁸ Giorgio Riello. *Op. cit.*, p. 139.

intended end, yet are there many things of truth disclosed by the way; and the collateral verity may unto reasonable speculations some what requite the capital indiscovery.¹⁷⁹

Digressiveness is presented as both the natural mode of detachment and wandering, and as a privileged mode of thinking and disposition towards knowing. It should be altogether unsurprising that the microcosm of man and his imaginative and spiritual realms are the richest of all spaces *par excellence*:

I could never content my contemplation with those generall pieces of wonders, the flux and reflux of the sea, the encrease of Nile, the conversion of the Needle to the North, and have studied to match and parallel those in the more obvious and neglected pieces of Nature, which without further travell I can doe in the Cosmography of my selfe; wee carry with us the wonders, we seeke without us: There is all *Africa*, and her prodigies in us;¹⁸⁰

In *Religio Medici*, the full range of metaphors of places – museum, microcosm, collection – is summarised by a telling confession: “I make not therefore my head a grave, but a treasure of knowledge.”¹⁸¹ In *Pseudodoxia*, Browne follows up on this notion, mapping an invented place and repurposing loss for the benefit of future generations.

In *The Pillow Book*, space and movement are even more constrained. The museum, a creative and personal space, is here replaced by the court and palace, with its rigid schedules and cordoned-off areas managing the flow of information in Shōnagon’s life and prose. The body in motion is not that of the male entrepreneurial, curious, naturalist; instead, Shōnagon uses the realities of the frustratingly circumscribed life of the Heian female courtier – a life of “eavesdropping and peeping”¹⁸² – as a fictional device to generate items for the list of *The Pillow Book*:

[207] *When it’s fearfully hot*, it’s a delicious cooling sight to *witness*, just at that point in the cool evening when the dusk has begun to blur the shapes of things, a passing carriage,

¹⁷⁹ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 481.

¹⁸⁰ *Religio Medici*, p. 24.

¹⁸¹ *Idem*, p. 74.

¹⁸² Ivan Morris. *Op. cit.*, p. 180.

perhaps that of some gentleman with outriders ahead, or even just some everyday carriage going by with the blinds up at the rear and one or two men inside. You particularly regret watching it disappear if it's accompanied by the sound of a *biwa* or a flute being played. It's really very odd how the sudden unfamiliar smell of the ox's leather crupper can nevertheless strike you as pleasant.¹⁸³

More than just sight, the listing of sounds and smells speak to her profound attuning with her surroundings, likely the result of the hours of fastidious immobility waiting for any entertainment, such as the many instances listed in “occasions for anxious waiting”¹⁸⁴ or “occasions when the time drags by.”¹⁸⁵ In any case, the *invenire* of the inventory concerns, once again, the coming into of human experience – a world lending itself to sensorial listing.¹⁸⁶ Thus, the whole text abounds with the language of sensual exactitude attainable only to those whose job consists of sitting silently for a great portion of the day, holding on to the sound of murmurs and distant voices, scents coming from the next room, fugitive gazes behind closed doors – “a twilight world of curtains, screens, and thick silk hangings.”¹⁸⁷ Another example, this time of “elegantly intriguing things:”

It's delightful to hear, through a wall or partition of some sort, the sound of someone, no mere gentlewoman, softly and elegantly clap her hands for service. Then, still separated from view behind, perhaps, a sliding door, you hear a youthful voice respond, and the swish of silk as someone arrives. It must be time for a meal to be served, for now come the jumbled sounds of chopsticks and spoons, and then the ear is arrested by the sudden metallic clink of a pouring pot's handle falling sideways and knocking against the pots.¹⁸⁸

Unlike, for instance, Perec's list attempts at exhausting a place, Shōnagon's struggle concerns bare places (unlike in early modern cabinets, objects were rare in the Heian court's aesthetic of

¹⁸³ *The Pillow Book*, p. 190. My emphasis.

¹⁸⁴ *The Pillow Book*, p. 154.

¹⁸⁵ *The Pillow Book*, p. 140. “The worst of all,” laments Shōnagon, “is simply a day of heavy rain” – rain meant no visitors, no excursions.

¹⁸⁶ An apt moment to draw attention to the possible etymological connection between *listing* and *listening*, from the Old English *hlystan* “hear, hearken.”

¹⁸⁷ Ivan Morris. *Op. cit.*, p. 217.

¹⁸⁸ *The Pillow Book*, p. 181.

refined modesty and actual material poverty¹⁸⁹) already at the edge of exhaustion, and a profound boredom that leads one to strain all senses for the faintest traces of any sensation and the intuitive confabulation (“no mere gentlewoman”) of its corresponding event, blending and magnifying them into a complete, but confusing, synaesthetic experience in which sounds are “jumbled” and “sudden,” objects are “separated from view.” Shōnagon’s prose is, like her life, even more railroaded than Browne’s. She rarely *comes upon* things. Yet, all of this waiting for things to come to us, rather than coming upon them, is how the *invenire* of the inventory takes place in *The Pillow Book*. More often either things come to her – passing carriages, an unexpected visitor, a letter – or her person is made to move, in a festival procession or pilgrimage, and to come upon things which she dutifully records. In her own words, she is a “witness” of her inventory. This limited movement within a much more rigid imagination of place is juxtaposed with the richness of her own inner life.

Nevertheless, the lists of *The Pillow Book* are also created or added to in relation to an imagined body. Even when the items are not as dense as in the example above, they are still placed within the reach of Shōnagon’s proposed evocation of experience, either by directly referring to a visible action, gesture, or impression, or by merely displaying them. In the palatial imaginary of *The Pillow Book*, it is hard not to conceive of these items as being, or having been, *there*; as sights belonging to the idealised court:

[39] *Refined and elegant things* – A girl’s over-robe of white on white over pale violet-grey. The eggs of the spot-billed duck. Shaved ice with a sweet syrup, served in a shiny new metal bowl. A crystal rosary. Wisteria flowers. Snow on plum blossoms. An adorable little child eating strawberries.¹⁹⁰

In other lists, such as “things that make you feel nostalgic,” the inventory is explicitly contextualised in terms of its *invenire*: among “last year’s summer fan” or “a dried sprig of *aoi*” Shōnagon notes “*coming across* a torn scrap of lavender- or grape-coloured fabric crumpled

¹⁸⁹ Ivan Morris. *Op. cit.*, p. 47.

¹⁹⁰ *The Pillow Book*, p. 46.

between the pages of a bound book.”¹⁹¹ And in other cases, it is the judgemental and refined taste of Shōnagon that asks us to imagine how it is to be in her place as she imagines herself looking at something and embodying it (such games of second-order observation are common in Shōnagon’s text), as in “things that look stifflingly hot,” such as “an extremely fat person with a great deal of hair” or “the hunting costume of a chief escort guard.”¹⁹² These examples mark a similarity with Browne’s *hypotypotical* prose, simultaneously highlighting the paradigmatic structure of the list: Shōnagon rarely explains why things are elegant or refined, or look “stifflingly hot,” allowing them instead to speak for themselves.

In doing so, Shōnagon often turns to the opposite of succinctness, and a list of small items might linger on one which, momentarily, threatens to turn into narrative – things begin to speak too much. An object of a gesture turns into a quasi-narrative evocation of a scene, played out almost to its conclusion, as in “times when someone’s presence produces foolish excitement:”

A mother who’s pampering and praising her spoilt child, who is actually nothing out of the ordinary.

The little introductory cough you give when you’re about to address someone who overawes you.

A child of four or five from a neighbouring place is playing up and annoying people, throwing things about and damaging them. You seize him to prevent him from behaving so wilfully, but then...¹⁹³

The narrative interlude goes on.

The effects of digression are thus present at two distinct levels: on the one hand – as in Browne’s prose –, disconnected items do not evince any meaningful syntagmatic relation to its proximates, and listing, as a form of counting, is conceived as a necessarily digressive mode of discourse. On the other hand, digression sometimes occurs inwards, as in the example above, as a

¹⁹¹ *The Pillow Book*, p. 30.

¹⁹² *The Pillow Book*, p. 126.

¹⁹³ *The Pillow Book*, p. 150.

consequence of extraordinary or idiosyncratic attention, a form of lingering or delay (akin to Schklovsky's view of the third function of digression¹⁹⁴), and another way to consider the isolated *thing in itself*.

This confabulatory effect displays just how much Shōnagon's immobility grounded a rich interior life, spent not only listening to conversations in adjacent rooms but making up stories, composing poems or witty repartees to letters, longing for processions and festivals, and, of course, judging the people around her. If Browne's prose aims to be subtly manuductive, Shōnagon would prefer to display the residual possible freedom of life under explicit manuduction. Yet, similarly to Browne, this movement of the mind accompanies and is emulated by the digressive structures of the list¹⁹⁵ and passages on literal digressions might offer the most explicit indication of how space is meant to be traversed, of a privileged mode of engaging with the inventorised world. The best examples of this are the carriage episodes, in which, as in *Pseudodoxia*, the rigid contiguity of a pre-determined route clashes violently with Shōnagon's curious mind and gaze – a lack of agency over one's own movements set against the digressive freedom of personal thoughts and attention:

As you go on your way, the various hedges to left and right will thrust an occasional branch into the carriage, and you quickly try to snap one off as you pass, lamenting the way it's gone again before you can seize it. And then there's the lovely moment when some worm wood gets caught and crushed by the carriage wheel, whose turning then carries it round and up, right to where you're sitting.¹⁹⁶

Even more intensely than in *Pseudodoxia*, Shōnagon articulates how the *invenire* which supplies the technique of the inventory list requires a rigid contiguous world just as much as a digressive freedom of attentiveness to register and invent it freely. In a different carriage episode,

¹⁹⁴ Viktor Schklovsky. *Theory of Prose*. Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2009, pp. 192-3.

¹⁹⁵ *The Pillow Book* is considered one of the foundational works of the Japanese genre of *zuihitsu* – literally, “following the brush.” This essayistic tradition prompted writers to, in the manner of Western essay traditions, simply writing whatever came to their mind, disconsidering matters of structure or purpose. See Linda H. Chance. “Japanese Essay” *Encyclopedia of the Essay*. Tracy Chevalier (ed.). London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997, p. 904.

¹⁹⁶ *The Pillow Book*, p. 190.

Shōnagon unwillingly mimics the dynamics and tensions of the irruption of the digressive into the narratively ordered, and the carriage, this time, heeds to her desires:

No sooner has the procession passed than a sort of hysteria takes over, with everyone pushing to get ahead of the others in a most dangerous and frightening fashion. You thrust out your fan and order your men not to be in such a hurry, but they take no notice, so you resign yourself to getting the carriage out to somewhere with a bit of space where you finally insist it be drawn to a halt (...)

To avoid the great melee caused by the carriages of the High Priestess's attendants and the rest all setting for home, you decide to return by a different route, and find yourself in an area that's vaguely reminiscent of some mountain village – there sure enough is a deutzia hedge, in reality a very wild and unkempt thing with lots of nasty branches poking out into the road. You have the men break off some sprays where the flowers are still more or less in bud rather than fully opened, and attach them here and there to the carriage, a charming replacement for yesterday's now sadly wilting laurel branches. And it's fun too to wonder how you'll ever get through the narrow lane ahead, only to find as you approach it that it's possible after all.¹⁹⁷

To stop in search of “somewhere with a bit of space,” to opt for a distinct route, and to discover as a result evocative objects that invent new realities – valuable enough to warrant register in *The Pillow Book* – is nothing short of an elaborate metaphor for digressive attention itself. Moreover, the excerpt teaches us how to navigate the digressive structures of *The Pillow Book*, articulating the rigid space of the palace and carriage route with the freedom of attention which comprises the structure of *invenire*: as one does when faced with the discontinuous texture of the literary text, it might provoke doubt as to whether it is possible to continue reading on productively. And yet, as it always happens, Shōnagon and Browne would advise, one needs only to carry on in order to discover that it is possible after all.

¹⁹⁷ *The Pillow Book*, p. 190.

A Paradox, Semiophores, and Deauthorialisation

To recapitulate, Browne and Shōnagon construct lists of places, enumerations of things which one could imagine to find, observe, feel, or imagine while traversing said places – what things one can *come upon*. Their use of the technique of the inventory is grounded on those same elements identified by Spitzer, namely, a sensorial imagination of the body in motion which, in turn, characterises the *invenire* of the inventory, a simultaneous ability to inventorise and invent. In this regard, both texts largely conform to and confirm Stewart’s assertion that “the spatial organisation of the collection (...) depends upon the creation of an individual perceiving and apprehending the collection *with eye and hand*.”¹⁹⁸ They both prise and understand the relationship between deictic markers of presence, a reliance on the imagery of sensoriality, a gradual reveal of the world as a list-in-the-making which the body comes upon – freely or fortuitously – in order to evoke on the page that very same world. The inventory is here deployed with an architectural function, as in the argument made by Frances Yates regarding the necessary architectural cohesion of the memory palace – artificial memory, perhaps not coincidentally, should also anchor this stability on “long lists of objects.”¹⁹⁹

The importance of the sensoriality of “eye and hand” cannot, however, be dissociated from the importance afforded to *thingness* which is also part of Spitzer’s framework and a crucial aspect of the paradigmatic and digressive form of the list as a technique of counting. Digressiveness represents both the freedom afforded to the observer to choose their own objects as well as allowing for a fixation on those very same objects – it concerns both a poetics of movement as well as the foundation of a paradigmatic surface logic of attention. Regarding this delaying effect which seeks to prod and emulate attentiveness – and terming it “inventory ontography”²⁰⁰ – Bogost notes that

¹⁹⁸ Susan Stewart. *Op. cit.*, p. 154. My emphasis.

¹⁹⁹ Frances Yates. *Op. cit.*, p. 115.

²⁰⁰ Ian Bogost. *Op. cit.*, p. 42.

lists help underscore those separations, turning the flowing legato of a literary account into the jarring staccato of real being. (...) Lists remind us that no matter how fluidly a system may operate, its members nevertheless remain utterly isolated, mutual aliens.”²⁰¹

“Lists of objects without explication,” he later adds, “can do the philosophical work of drawing our attention toward them with greater attentiveness.”²⁰² Browne and Shōnagon’s technique makes use of both elements of Spitzer’s bazaar spirit: sensoriality and thingness, the first concerning a subjective presentation of the world, while the latter aims for objectivity. In seeing these two elements deployed in the texts, however, we begin also to understand how they play off each other, particularly how they conspire to engender worlds but also how their expressive tension might run to troubling limitations.

Keeping in mind the larger political and literary ambitions alluded to earlier – the anticipatory or utopian mode of the two texts –, we observe a close relationship between these two aspects of the techniques of presence of the inventory and the creation of “autonomous” worlds, or, once again, worlds that are stable and convincing, that possess a high degree of rhetorical strength. The utopian mode, writes Krishan Kumar, prefers less “to argue from general principles” than “to demonstrate by *imaginative projection and vivid particularity*, the truth of one’s views. The proof will come not, in the first place, from intellectual persuasion but from the evidence of the senses – from what people are made to see and hear.”²⁰³ A process of gradual accumulation of sensorial evidence, in opposition to the artful chaining of logical arguments, suits perfectly the paradigmatic and digressive rhetoric of inventory list-making, serving as the basis for the invention of the utopian. Conversely, as Stewart notes, spatiality constitutes the basis for the effect of, so to speak, narrative debasement: “the spatial whole of the collection supersedes the individual narratives that ‘lie behind

²⁰¹ *Idem*, p. 40.

²⁰² *Idem*, p. 45.

²⁰³ Krishan Kumar. “The Utopian Project: From More to the Millennium” *Utopia: Mitos e Formas*. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1993, p. 31. My emphasis.

it”²⁰⁴ – an anti-narrative tendency which the “*staccato*” of list forms only heightens. If the lists of the inventory rely on an “imaginative projection” of the world via its uncovering by an imagined body, the digressive impetus that compels a list-maker to leave items unexplained and unconnected is a main factor contributing to the sense (and to the rhetorical paradigmatic power) of “vivid *particularity*.” Neither utopia nor inventory can part with any of the two.

Imaginative projection and vivid particularity work together within the rhetoric of *invenire* of the inventory listing technique. But they also concern a fundamental tension – a paradox even – at the heart of the inventory’s most meaningful expressive and poetic dimension, between the necessary imagined contiguity of its imagined world – the solidity which lends it autonomy – and the digressive method of its presentation. How to articulate the requirements of contiguity with the fundamental discontinuity of the list? In examples such as Browne’s flurry of experiments or Shōnagon’s “refined and elegant things,” modes of seeing might be conjured, but in none of them the eye moves at all – images merely flash in a passive retina. Gesture is alluded to while being simultaneously and concretely absent. We must thus ask ourselves: how to articulate the paradigmatic, isolated, digression with what is essentially a descriptive logic of presence, of “eye and hand”? Bogost is right in noting a seeming incompatibility between the *staccato* of thingness and the *legato* fluidity of our moving through them, different aspects which the inventory means to conjure at once. Browne and Shōnagon offer a vague methodological guideline for how those spaces should be traversed, seemingly harmonising the two sides. Yet, as we will see, such proposals carry their own unanswered questions.

The issue goes right to the centre of the ambiguous relationship between list and description, alluded to in the introduction. At stake here is a real incompatibility between the seemingly descriptive nature of the inventory list – which Hamon and Spitzer correctly identified – and the subject-centred nature of descriptive discourse itself. Yet, the mode of the list – even if conceding

²⁰⁴ Susan Stewart. *Op. cit.*, p. 153.

that it finds some place as the basis of description – concerns a very distinct mode of discourse. It inevitably presents a definite challenge to that “esthétique globale de la délégation du descriptif aux personnages”²⁰⁵ as well as to (in our specific cases) the subsumption of the accumulative process in *The Pillow Book* or *Pseudodoxia* to a purely descriptive nature of the techniques of *invenire*. In inventories such as these, the effects of digression and discontinuity underline not a sense of the harmonisation with a contiguous movement or sensorial experience – which the movement of the eye and hand would seem to suggest – but rather a dramatic *disembodiment*.

In *The Pillow Book*, for example, it is always possible to delegate any list to the aesthetic program or rubric of ‘things in Empress Teishi’s court’ and, thus, to Shōnagon’s character as a witness to and bearer of those same things. However, some of its most bare-bones lists have the contrary effect of appearing to erase any sense of authorship, contributing to an illusion of objective presentation devoid of subjectivity only superficially closer to Braudel’s *vérité*:

[263] *Hunting costumes* – Clove-tan. Soft white silk. Red-purple weave. Pine-leaf green. Leaf green. Cherry blossom. Also, green wisteria.²⁰⁶

In this very literal meaning of inventory, we are faced with, perhaps, the “énigme” effect of which Hamon writes when discussing those descriptions which, evacuated of essential explicit instructions (the “pantonyme”) and clear relations with their rubric and principle of organisation, have been “réduits” into a list whose legibility becomes threatened.²⁰⁷ Indeed, it is in the reduced lists of Shōnagon that we often run into difficulties of articulation with the otherwise ubiquitous sense of presence. In a short list like “Common things that suddenly sound special” (“Someone clearing his throat at dawn”) or “Things that look fresh and pure” (“The transparent light in water as you pour it into something”) it is simpler to conjure the realm of embodied/described experience. It becomes harder to make out where we are in “Hunting costumes,” “Forests” (“Ukita Forest. Ueki Forest.

²⁰⁵ Philippe Hamon. *Op. cit.*, p. 189.

²⁰⁶ *The Pillow Book*, p. 231.

²⁰⁷ Philippe Hamon. *Op. cit.*, pp. 128-9.

Iwase Forest. Tachikiki Forest.”) or in the purely linguistic games of “Things that look ordinary but become extraordinary when written.”²⁰⁸

This refusal to delegate the descriptive aspect of the inventory technique to a character – the inventorier – goes beyond the *staccato* effect of individual lists. The constant double movement between the poles of the autobiographical mode seemingly inherent in the rubric of the collection,²⁰⁹ and the refusal of Browne or Shōnagon to offer themselves as concrete objects of their own inventories – as inventorier-rubrics to their lists²¹⁰ – is present also at the level of the structure of the works and their presentations: in *Pseudodoxia* and *The Pillow Book*, this evasiveness goes beyond the concealment of any sort of argument via the paradigmatic mode of discourse, becoming a fully-fledged literary program. An explicit and false modesty – the “arrogant courtesy” of the essayist, in the words of Georg Lukács²¹¹ – serves as an argument for indulging in accumulation and dismissing a full commitment to “intellectual persuasion” by defacing the author’s character, the “personage”:

The Pillow Book

I set to work with this boundless pile of paper to fill it to the last sheet with all manner of odd things, so no doubt there’s much in these pages that makes no sense.

Overall, I have chosen to write about the things that delight, or that people find impressive, including poems as well as things such as trees, plants, birds, insects, and so forth, and for this reason people may criticize it for not living up to expectations and only proving the limits of my own sensibility. But after all, I merely wrote for my personal amusement things that I myself have thought and felt, and I never intended that it should be placed alongside other books and judged on par with them.²¹²

²⁰⁸ *The Pillow Book*, pp. 150-1. The “extraordinary” character of such words is supposedly due to a literal reading of the Chinese characters which composed them.

²⁰⁹ Susan Stewart. *Op. cit.*, p. 154.

²¹⁰ We could here refer to other collections such as Georges Perec’s “Je me souviens,” Roland Barthes’ “J’aime, Je n’aime pas,” or Wisława Szymborska’s “Możliwości” (Possibilities) as less ambiguous (with some caveats) cases where the lists’s rubric is the autobiographical inventorier.

²¹¹ Georg Lukács. “On the Nature and Form of the Essay.” *Soul and Form*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1978, p. 9.

²¹² *The Pillow Book*, pp. 255-6.

Pseudodoxia Epidemica

And therefore surely in this work attempts will exceed performances; it being composed by snatches of time, as medical vacations, and the fruitless importunity of Uroscopy would permit us.²¹³ And therefore also, perhaps it hath not found that regular and constant stile, those infallible experiments and those assured determinations, which the subject sometime requireth, and might be expected from others, whose quiet doors and unmolested hours afford no such distractions. (...) And we shall so far encourage contradiction, as to promise no disturbance, or reoppose any Pen, that shall Fallaciously or captiously refute us, that shall only lay hold of our lapses, single out Digressions, Corollaries, or Ornamental conceptions, to evidence his own as indifferent truths.²¹⁴

The structure of the argument is strikingly similar: yes, they seem to say, our texts might be criticised on account of their arbitrary terms of inclusion – “odd things” which make no sense in Shōnagon’s apology, digressions, corollaries, and ornaments in Browne’s. Yet, they stand by those terms, also on account, in both cases, of an ineffable personalisation (i.e. not arbitrary at all) of the terms of production of the text, which renders all criticism ultimately indifferent – even if it is true. The ‘particularity’ effect of these inventory lists is associated with a trivialisation of those very same things, which comes to reflect the author’s action and distraction, hovering ambiguously over verdicts regarding usefulness vs. pertinence, presence vs. absence. In the utopian mode of paradigmatic argumentation, the inventorier himself, whose subjective experience could have some responsibility in choosing things, also requires urgent trivialisation, in order to grant the utopian world the highest possible degree of autonomy. If there ever was a body in relation to whom the inventory was listed, Shōnagon and Browne have, in the interest of an illusion of objective paradigmaticality, all the reasons to minimise its presence.

It should be noted that no single strategy condenses all efforts to de-authoralise *Pseudodoxia* or *The Pillow Book* – they use all means at their disposal in disposing themselves of authorship. In

²¹³ Browne humorously refers here to his main occupation as medical doctor. His specialty was urinary diseases.

²¹⁴ *Pseudodoxia*, pp. 4-6.

the examples above, Browne and Shōnagon make an appeal to the ineffable dynamics of subjective preference, which could clue us in to a notion of personal rubric to solve Hamon's *énigme*. Yet, at other times they make the opposite argument: that their text is not theirs at all, but that it was shaped by and belongs to a community of readers. Thus Shōnagon notes after a short description of an episode that "stories of this kind really belong in the 'Things it's frustrating and embarrassing to witness' section. I've only added it here because people have begged me not to leave anything out."²¹⁵ In the case of Shōnagon's text, the case gains further nuance by virtue of the characteristics of classical Japanese, for, as translator Meredith McKinney explains, "this detachment is exacerbated by the fact that the classical Japanese language does not need, and very seldom has, a specific subject to the verb. Is it I, or you, or we, or perhaps she, who is experiencing this?"²¹⁶

Similarly, Browne's communal project of civil learning always leaves an open door to a further discussion that treats *Pseudodoxia* as an open-ended, flexible, and self-conscious work:

And first we crave exceeding pardon in the audacity of the Attempt, humbly acknowledging a work of such concernment unto truth, and difficulty in it self, did well deserve the conjunction of many heads. And surely more advantageous had it been unto Truth, to have fallen into the endeavors of some co-operating advancers, that might have performed it to the life, and added authority thereto; which the privacy of our condition, and unequal abilities cannot expect.²¹⁷

The author in Browne and Shōnagon becomes a self-effacing, apologetic, figure, who might admit to writing in a personal (even autobiographical) mode and simultaneously perform an evasion from all accountability for the construction of the text and its reception. Thus, they enter a tense negotiation with another of Spitzer's points: triviality or usefulness, the purposeless or the essential. The complex manoeuvring between usefulness, sensoriality, and particularity – three of the four elements of Spitzer's definition –, articulating the operational dynamics of the technique of

²¹⁵ *The Pillow Book*, p. 105.

²¹⁶ Meredith McKinney. *Op. cit.*, p. xxiv.

²¹⁷ *Pseudodoxia*, pp. 3-4.

inventorying, is accurately grasped by Krzysztof Pomian's *semiophore* which, in the context of the collection (within a framework of "*technicité*" explicitly indebted to Leroi-Gourhan's seminal text²¹⁸), describes how this triangular set of relations operates with the goal of conjuring invisible worlds by referring to inventories.

The collection is defined by Pomian as a "monde étrange d'où l'utilité semble bannie à jamais." In it, "tout se passe donc comme si l'on ne poursuivait qu'un seul but : amasser des objets pour les exposer au regard." "On ne peut," he cautions, "sans commettre un abus de langage, étendre la notion d'utilité au point d'en attribuer une à des objets qui ne font que s'offrir aux regards."²¹⁹ The balance between utility and sight concretes in what Pomian sees as the main function of the collection: its objects are always "intermédiaires entre les spectateurs, quels qu'ils soient, et les habitants d'un monde auquel ceux-là sont extérieurs," "entre ceux qui les regardent et le monde qu'ils représentent."²²⁰ He continues:

Un clivage apparaît à l'intérieur même du visible. D'un côté se situent des *choses*, des *objets utiles* (...). Tous ces objets sont manipulés et tous ils exercent ou subissent des modifications physiques, visibles : ils s'usent. D'un autre côté se situent des *sémiophores*, des *objets qui n'ont point d'utilité* aux sens qui vient d'être précisé, mais qui représentent l'invisible, c'est-à-dire sont dotés d'une *signification* ; n'étant pas manipulés mais exposés au regard, ils ne subissent pas d'usure. L'activité productrice s'avère donc maintenant orientée en deux sens différents : vers le visible, d'une part ; vers l'invisible, de l'autre ; vers la maximisation de l'utilité, vers celle de la signification. (...) Remarquons que tant l'utilité que la signification supposent un observateur, car elles ne sont que des rapports que des individus ou des groupes entretiennent, par l'intermédiaire des objets, avec leur environnement visible ou invisible. (...) S'ensuivent deux conclusions : la première, c'est qu'un sémiophore accède à la plénitude de son être quand il devient une pièce de collection ; la seconde, plus importante, c'est que l'utilité et la

²¹⁸ Krzysztof Pomian. "Entre l'invisible et le visible: la collection." *Collectionneurs, Amateurs et Curieux: Paris, Venise : XVI^e - XVIII^e siècle*. Paris: Gallimard, 1987, p. 41.

²¹⁹ *Idem*, p. 16.

²²⁰ *Idem*, pp. 35-6.

signification sont mutuellement exclusives : plus un objet est chargé de signification, moins il a d'utilité, et *vice versa*.²²¹

This long passage offers us valuable guidelines in clarifying many of the dynamics at the centre of the operational chains of inventory techniques, helping us to clarify some of the intricacies described so far, namely, how sensoriality can be understood in a framework which can dispense with the idea of character.

In the first place, it is worth noting how both Browne and Shōnagon evince a strong sensibility to what we could describe as the semiophoric quality of the items they list. In *Pseudodoxia* as in *The Pillow Book*, it should then not be a surprise to find them obsessively orbiting around the question of the invisible of the visible. Naturally, everything in the *sprezzatura*-laden world of Shōnagon is prone to being merely a point of referral to something else – *The Pillow Book* endlessly comments on clothes, gestures, facial expressions, and, most importantly, their significance within the complex aesthetic system of the court. This exercise, however, transcends accounts of mere palatial, sophisticated, displays of virtuosity, and Shōnagon leans heavily on it in the process of evocation of place. In a list like “things now useless that recall a glorious past,” the semiophoric quality of the listed elements could not be more explicit, the rubric echoing almost perfectly (aside from the laudatory overtones) Pomian’s formulation:

A fine embroidery-edged mat that’s become threadbare.

A screen painted in the Chinese style, that’s now turned dark and discoloured and developed a scarred surface.

A painter with poor eyesight.

A switch of false hair seven or eight feet long, that’s now fading and taking on a reddish tinge.

Grape-coloured fabric when the ash dye has turned.

A man who was a great lover in his day but is now old and decrepit.

²²¹ *Idem*, pp. 42-3

A tasteful house whose garden trees have been destroyed by fire. The pond is still there, but it's now uncared for and thick with pond weed.²²²

All items in Shōnagon's list toy with Pomian's notion that the ability to establish ties with the invisible should come always at the cost of utility. The idealised court's existence might have depended on a vehement affirmation of the relevance of all such things. Its present evocation in the form of an inventory of a utopia, however, depends on the affirmation of their lack thereof.

The case of Browne is far more complex, as this semiophoric quality extends not only to every level of his project, but also to the heart of his philosophical principles. Tied as it was to his deepest cosmological assumptions, the notion that "this visible world is but a picture of the invisible"²²³ can be identified, in the case of *Pseudodoxia*, for instance, in his "fascination with skin and its properties,"²²⁴ or the broader relation (which included also dermatological matters) between visible events and portents, prophecies, and all those which he termed "magical signalities"²²⁵ – as Loraine Daston points out, the "monster" was both the wonderful which exceeded representational parameters and its visual symbolic representation, out of the Latin *monstrare*.²²⁶ More significant and warranting special attention, however, are the hieroglyphical theory highly popular in

²²² *The Pillow Book*, p. 162.

²²³ *Religio Medici*, p. 21.

²²⁴ Browne's interest in skin was in tandem with a revival of the attention paid to this organ by the medical community in the seventeenth-century, and it is possible that he may have become alert to it during his tour through Europe, specifically in the University of Leiden where he wrote his dissertation on smallpox. In *Pseudodoxia*, matters of the skin take up a considerable amount of space and chapters such as "of hair upon moults" or "of spots in our nails and palmistry" make the connection between skin as the object of hermeneutical study and the observation of those "magical signalities." In the sequence of three chapters on black skin ("of the blackness of Negroes," "Of the same," and "a digression on Blackness") Browne gives full rein to his fascinations. Skin shared a number of important features with the fundamental matter of inventory lists and its technique which we have discussed so far: it was a doubly superficial subject for it literally belonged to the world of surfaces which Browne prized *in lieu* of the deep world of the organs and the soul, but it was also confined to the realm of the trivially obvious, being "often dismissed as only cosmetic in value, and rarely studied in anything approaching an extensive or systematic fashion." Both ornamental and exposed to the *regard*, skin is to Browne an important emblem of the semiophoric quality of his inventorised world. See Reid Barbour. "The Hieroglyphics of Skin." *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed*. Reid Barbour and Claire Preston (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 293.

²²⁵ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 391.

²²⁶ Loraine Daston, Katharine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1150-1750*. New York: Zone Books, 1998, p. 50.

intellectual circles since the Renaissance²²⁷ and Browne's own theory of the origin of errors stated in the introductory chapters of *Pseudodoxia*.

Hieroglyphs were, to Browne and his contemporaries, the "best evasion" to the confusion of Babel. Since they could not be read but only interpreted "intuitively," they were the closest to the "language of things," as they reflected their true name given to them by Adam.²²⁸ Addressing "the eye rather than the ear,"²²⁹ hieroglyphical theory expanded in the Renaissance to a mode of reading not only ancient hieroglyphs but the whole of creation – the book of nature. Hieroglyphical thinking was thus a highly popular mode of engaging with the fundamentally ornamental (i.e. trivial) nature of the world and language itself, all while proposing that to evacuate things from projected human relations, to consider them in their *thingness*, opens the door to a linguistic Edenic world.

A similar conclusion is reached after a consideration of one of the origins of errors which Browne describes in *Pseudodoxia* (which he saves for last and to which he devotes two chapters): "the endeavours of Satan." Particularly nocive, the Devil is intimately related in Browne's view with the harmful manipulation of our relationship to visible phenomena in general and the nature of causality in particular:

he induceth us, to ascribe effects unto causes of no cognation; and distorting the order and theory of causes perpendicular to their effects, he draws them aside unto things whereto they run parallel, and in their proper motions would never meet together. (...) But above all he deceiveth us, when we ascribe the effects of things unto evident and seeming causalities (...) concluding Metaphors from realities, and from conceptions metaphorical inferring realities again.²³⁰

Satan's pernicious acts are related to the misplacement of causality as an over-interpretation of visible phenomena, which ties back to Browne's preoccupation with false prophecies and portents

²²⁷ Frances Yates. *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, p. 163.

²²⁸ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 379.

²²⁹ Thomas C. Singer. "Sir Thomas Browne's 'Emphaticall decussation, or fundamentall figure': Geometrical Hieroglyphs and *The Garden of Cyrus*" *English Literary Renaissance* 17.1 (1987), p. 88.

²³⁰ *Pseudodoxia*, pp. 71-2.

as well as, in a broader sense, his concern with an excessive leaning on depth versus surface. As always, Browne would prefer to let singular things and events speak for themselves, to lend themselves to a productive form of superficial and isolated reading, rather than being subjected to erroneous relational interpretations. To put things in relation – particularly in the cause-effect structures which characterise the narrative mode – is to flirt with the Devil. To refrain from doing so is to allow things to lose an immediate and practical use (most of the “magical signalities” are concerned with paltry, everyday, events) but to open in this way the door to an invisible world of far greater significance.

A closer look at the semiophoric quality of many of Shōnagon’s and Browne’s items allows us to see how they enter, via an ambiguous prising of superficial structures, into a complex relation with the notion of utility or triviality. Both authors broadly respect the quasi-mathematical inverse relation between utility and signification advanced by Pomian, suggesting that the repeated emphasis on the triviality, purposelessness, or superficiality of the items can have the corresponding aim of increasing their significance as semiophores. In this way, they also refrain from underlining the signification side of the matter, alluding to it byway of the item standing for it.

Beyond these more explicit references, the work of trivialisation in *The Pillow Book* and *Pseudodoxia* is, above all and as we have seen, a function of the digressive structures of the list itself. The specific triviality of the displayed items (skin, discoloured fabrics, etc...) is almost merely fortuitous or coincidental. As Sammons notes, “the overall effect is an ambiguous one, since the cataloguer may assume a posture of complete objectivity while at the same time appearing to set aside the narrator’s usual responsibilities.”²³¹ What matters most is the emphasis on a structural and literary triviality: firstly, the digressive, paradigmatic, structure of the list evinces a necessarily trivialisation of the syntagmatic relationship between the items. Judging to what degree each of them might be essential is less important than considering them as isolated units whose importance

²³¹ Benjamin Sammons. *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

is not a function of other items. This transposition of listed elements to a role of triviality – a permanent sense of tangentiality to what is the rubric or central point –, as if any of them could be replaced by any other, paradoxically serves to heighten their signification as carriers of meaning, their capability to serve as referents to an invisible world accessible only through the collection. Moreover, the meaning of utility or lack thereof is broadened and redefined in the texts as more than a property of the object or quality of the mode of discourse. As the apologies quoted suggest, Browne and Shōnagon also toy with such ideas within the context of their literariness, their fragile place within a narrative context, and their seemingly arbitrary or trivial relation to the autobiographical nature of the collection. The push and pull of uselessness and signification takes place at almost all stages of the works – content, form, and reception.

The most valuable contribution of Pomian's semiophoric framework, however, concerns the object centred nature of his approach grounded on "technicité," that is, treating objects as intermediary *agents*. Which is to say that the insistence on the visibility of the list of the inventory serves less the purpose of orientating towards or suggesting the one who sees, of participating in the psychological or emotional construction of a seeing narrator or character, but as a stepping stone in the articulation of a *seen object* as intermediary *semiophore*. Actancy is disconnected from the inventorier and emanates, instead, from the items themselves. They presuppose – or rather, require – an observer but refuse any function directed towards the characterisation or construction of said observer. In this regard, it marks a definite distinction – even opposite function – with description, working not towards the constitution of an implicit subject, but rather the tentative suggestion of an objective world independent of its subject, for which the collection of items in the inventory can serve as unlikely objective proof – a replacement of the logical argument structure for a hypotyposis of the utopian which works along the same reasoning. Semiophoric items in the inventory are exposed to imagined sight or regard, immersed in the sensorial world of the *invenire* of the inventory technique but the question of "who senses" is made less important than the suggestion

that the invented world can be independent of any subjective observation. Sight becomes a property of the seen.

Pomian's semiophore helps to set in place the final piece of the complex operational chains composing the technique of the inventory, wadding through its seemingly paradoxical proposals – a-personal presentiality, for example. Thus, the strategies of the technique of the inventory in Browne and Shōnagon have two separate goals which coalesce into a project for a new literary utopianism of *time* and *space*. While spatiality is a result of the inventory technique's reliance on the sensorial character of *invenire* and the attention afforded to the item as isolated thing-in-itself, the ensuing ambiguous relation with triviality and usefulness allows the inventorier to perform a kind of self-denial. The goal of this abolishment of subjectivity, on the other hand, is a deliverance from the impositions of temporality, leading us back to the questions raised by the necessity of imagining a coherent body *coming upon* the inventory. With a clear guide for the uses and expressive dimensions of the inventory in place, we can now turn to the very clear and practical purposes which dictates the concrete methods by which Browne's and Shōnagon's lists are constructed and used: total freedom of literary movement, and a political rhetoric of digression.

A Political Rhetoric of Digression

Pomian's analysis includes a decidedly political or sociological angle: one of the aspects he underlines is that the balance between the logic of utility and the logic of signification is necessarily unstable “surtout dans les sociétés où le choix entre l'utilité et la signification devient l'enjeu d'un conflit.”²³² No better description could be applied to Browne or Shōnagon's contexts, both of which were characterised by an increasing intolerance to the literarily useless, trivial, or ornamental. Their

²³² Krzysztof Pomian. *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

preemptive defences quoted above speak to the consciousness of their writing in times when embracing the useless could be regarded as politically and even morally suspect.

In particular, Browne's context is one of deep wariness towards the ornamental and the trivial at several levels: the theological conflicts of Puritanism, Anglicanism and Papism all orbited around the nature of church ornamentation and decoration and the morally acceptable minimum of human artistic, religious and mystical expression. As Kevin Killeen notes, "*Pseudodoxia* registers clearly the experience of iconoclasm and produces a substantial engagement with the destruction of churches that so exercised the country in the years of the civil war."²³³ In the literary context, Samuel Johnson, Browne's biographer, might have praised the "exuberance of knowledge, and plenitude of ideas," the "collateral considerations" or the labyrinthine paragraphs, "mazes, in themselves flowery and pleasing."²³⁴ Yet, the conservative controversialist Alexander Ross – Browne's fiercest and most notable critic – took issue precisely with the use of the labyrinth as a metaphor for the difficulty of true knowledge,²³⁵ regarding it as heretical, for "to still be doubting is a signe of a bad Christian"²³⁶ and to leave things hanging in ambiguous margins is a grave misstep. Even Johnson notes that such digressive tendencies do "sometimes obstruct the tendency of [Browne's] reasoning."²³⁷

²³³ Kevin Killeen. *Op. cit.*, p. 204.

²³⁴ Samuel Johnson. "The Life of Sir Thomas Browne." in Thomas Browne. *Major Works*. London: Penguin Books, 1977, p. 507.

²³⁵ "Ross also accused Browne of dodging controversy and for emphasizing, with his fondness for the image of a labyrinth, the unnecessary difficulty of knowing what is true." Anne Cotterill. *Op. cit.*, pp. 137-8.

²³⁶ Alexander Ross *apud* John R. Knott, Jr. "Sir Thomas Browne and the Labyrinth of Truth." *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne: The Ann Arbor Tercentenary Lectures and Essays*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982, p. 20.

²³⁷ Samuel Johnson. *Loc. cit.*

The philosophical underpinnings of an emerging scientific culture would also concrete around a similar renouncement for the literarily trivial.²³⁸ Thomas Spratt's *History of the Royal-Society of London* is a classic example of the combative tone directed at the problem of "the luxury and redundancy of speech" plaguing natural philosophy:

And, in a few words, I dare say; that of all the Studies of men, nothing may be sooner obtain'd, than this vicious abundance of *Phrase*, this trick of *Metaphors*, this volubility of *Tongue*, which makes so great a noise in the world. But I spend words in vain; for the evil is now so inveterate, that it is hard to know whom to *blame*, or where to begin *reform*. (...) [The Royal Society] has therefore been most rigorous in putting in execution, the only Remedy, that can be found for this extravagance: and that has been, a constant Resolution, to reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swelling of style.²³⁹

Spratt's reform would have replaced the fragile but intense Elizabethan "analogical thinking and poetic reason, (...) a style rich in implications and able to express a closely interwoven texture of experience" with a new style characterised by a "univocal language capable only of manipulating fact and the more obvious social attitudes,"²⁴⁰ writes S. L. Bethell, adding that the old style is unmistakably where Browne's prose is situated. The attitude and influence of the Royal Society was "felt most immediately upon prose,"²⁴¹ crystallising, in the Restoration and via the influence of

²³⁸ One of the most curious of which is to be found in the general aversion to the character of the 'virtuoso', the man who studies for curiosity's sake rather than humanity's benefit, famously lampooned in Shadwell's play "The Virtuoso" performed in 1676, and vituperously attacked as a pretentious individual who values insignificant objects over social virtues, in an early feminist essay by Judith Drake, in which we also find both the list used to powerful rhetorical (satirical) effect and another allusion to Noah's ark as the model for the collector: "there are another sort of Impertinents, who, as they mind not the Business of other Men where it concerns 'em not, neglect it likewise where it does; and amuse themselves continually with the Contemplation of those things, which the rest of the World slight as useless, and below their regard. Of these the most Egregious is the *Virtuoso*, who is one that has sold an Estate in Land to purchase one in *Scallop, Conch, Muscle, Cockle Shells, Periwinkles, Sea Shrubs, Weeds, Mosses, Sponges, Coralls, Corallines, Sea Fans, Pebbles, Marchasites* and *Flint stones*; and has abandon'd the Acquaintance and Society of Men for that of *Insects, Worms, Grubbs, Maggots, Flies, Moths, Locusts, Beetles, Spiders, Grasshoppers, Snails, Lizards* and *Tortoises*. His study is like *Noah's Ark*, the general Rendezvous of all Creatures in the *Universe*, and the greatest part of his Moveables are the remainders of his Deluge." (Anonymous [Judith Drake]. *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex*. London, 1696, pp. 96-7) Thomas Browne was most certainly a "virtuoso" of the kind Shadwell ridiculed, set against the more Baconian inclined fellows at the Royal Society. See Joseph M. Gilde. "Shadwell and the Royal Society: Satire in *The Virtuoso*." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 10.3 (1970), pp. 469-490.

²³⁹ Thomas Spratt. *The History of the Royal-Society of London, For the Improving of Natural Knowledge*. London, 1657, pp. 111-3.

²⁴⁰ S. L. Bethell. *Op. cit.*, p. 101.

²⁴¹ *Idem*, p. 103.

towering thinkers such as Bacon,²⁴² into a theory of literary and poetic composition which severed judgement and fancy (imagination), structure and ornament, content and form – with general detriment for the formers.²⁴³

In the case of Shōnagon's text, its contemporary critics also focused disproportionately on the perceived purposelessness of Shōnagon's project and its content, most notably, her contemporary Murasaki Shikibu:

She was dreadfully conceited. She thought herself so clever and littered her writings with Chinese characters; but if you examined them closely, they left a great deal to be desired. Those who think of themselves as being superior to everyone else in this way will inevitably suffer and come to a bad end, and people who have become so precious that they go out of their way to try and be sensitive in the most uncompromising situations, trying to recapture every moment of interest, however slight, are bound to look ridiculous and superficial.²⁴⁴

Murasaki's masterful *The Tale of Genji* was in its style, aims, and reception much less problematic than *The Pillow Book*. One might say it still is, if we attend to either Naomi Fukumori's assertion that the latter's purpose in academic circles is confined mostly as supplementary to the study of Murasaki's text – merely providing useful background descriptions for the reading of her more

²⁴² Bacon's call for a new style, in his *De Augmentis Scientiarum* (1623): "Somewhat sounder is another form of style. (...) It consists wholly in this: that the words be sharp and pointed; sentences concised." Francis Bacon *apud* Jeremiah S. Finch. *Op. cit.*, p. 130.

²⁴³ S. L. Bethell. *Op. cit.*, p. 109. It might be tempting to associate these factors and Sprat's opinions with the fact that Browne never formally entered the Royal Society. Yet, Chalmers advises caution on such rushed pronouncements: "Why Sir Thomas Browne was not elected a fellow of the Royal Society has long been the subject of conjecture. Every circumstance appears to make him eligible. His Royalist loyalty was never doubted; his *Pseudodoxia*, which he recommended to the use of the 'honoured worthies who endeavour the advancement of learning,' was in its fourth edition when the royal charter was granted to them; he knew many of the fellows and was respected by them as a good scientist; his son [,] Edward, became a fellow; Sir Thomas was a correspondent. It may be that the unorthodox religious expressions of *Religio Medici* frightened off the founders, who were particularly chary of the *opprobrium ecclesiasticum* (...). The late Professor Herford thought that Browne's style blackballed him (...) and Professor Richard F. Jones offers rather indirect evidence from Alexander Ross's *Medicus Medicatus*, which he says, 'furnishes strong support to Herford's contention' (...). No explanation that I have seen is completely satisfactory, but the old theory of Wilkin that 'probably from local considerations he never became a fellow' of the Royal Society appears to me the most plausible. (...) It is unlikely that Browne's 'drudging practice' in Norwich would have permitted him to attend philosophical gatherings in London." Gordon Keith Chalmers. "Sir Thomas Browne, True Scientist." *Osiris* 2 (1936), p. 31n16.

²⁴⁴ Murasaki Shikibu *apud* Meredith McKinney. *Op. cit.*, p. xxvii.

literarily valuable work –,²⁴⁵ or the reaction of contemporary readers such as David Galef who, in his *The Art of Brevity*, quotes Shōnagon and immediately asks the reader to consider whether Shōnagon strays “too much from her focus? Is she reasonable in her list of annoyances?”²⁴⁶

Indebted to the tradition of Chinese moral didactic literature, *The Tale of Genji* was the master template for what serious literature – and not *divertissements* such as *The Pillow Book* – should be.²⁴⁷ Its goal was to teach sensibility, to, in the words of eighteenth-century critic Motoori Norinaga, nurture “the flower of awareness of the sorrow of human existence.”²⁴⁸ More concretely, *The Tale of Genji* was meant to display and instruct its readers on the fundamental aesthetic value which was seen to dominate all Heian literature and art: *mono no aware*, often translated as “the pathos of things.” Shōnagon, on the other hand, “seems intent on presenting these moments simply for their own sake,”²⁴⁹ which is to say, in their *thingness*. Whereas Heian *mono no aware* literature prized the pursuit of a communal sensibility²⁵⁰ of attunement towards the fact of the world’s impermanence, evanescence, and unreality,²⁵¹ Shōnagon’s *okashi* – a term which she repeats endlessly and which McKinney translates as delightful, charming, or lovely – is celebratory rather than tragic, light rather than heavy, personal rather than communal – and trivially superficial, rather than deep.

We have seen the kind of responses that such contexts prompted in Browne and Shōnagon: an explicit false modesty together with the digressive rhetoric that the technique of the list facilitates – simultaneously responsible and not for the inclusion of trivialities which the nature of their projects had deemed necessary. The presence and absence of the list-maker in *Pseudodoxia* and *The Pillow Book* becomes a game of tug-of-war, carefully negotiated, artfully concealed. If the mode of the

²⁴⁵ Naomi Fukumori. *Op. cit.*, p. 3.

²⁴⁶ David Galef. *The Art of Brevity: A Flash Fiction Handbook*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, p. 34.

²⁴⁷ Thomas P. Kasulis. *Engaging Japanese Philosophy: A Short History*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2018, p. 143.

²⁴⁸ Motoori Norinaga *apud* Bede Scott. *Op. cit.*, p. 87.

²⁴⁹ Meredith McKinney. *Op. cit.*, p. xxiii.

²⁵⁰ Thomas P. Kasulis. *Loc. cit.*

²⁵¹ Ivan Morris. *Op. cit.*, pp. 125-7.

inventory conjures a body who comes upon it, it is in Browne's and Shōnagon's interest to insist as effectively as possible on a contradictory ontological independence of the world which is being inventoried in front of our eyes; to convince us that it is independent of the observer, while we are being shown that it is not at all. In this game, digression plays a crucial role against one of their most pressing concerns: the passing of time, and the nature of temporality. If both Browne and Shōnagon might have concrete reasons to wish time to pass – Shōnagon would like to fast-forward boredom, Browne, on a more abstract level, writes in view of the incoming day of judgement – they both deny the temporal inevitability of history left unchecked: what they perceive as anarchy, barbarity, political tragedy surrounds them, and historical unfolding in time is a liability at both personal and philosophical levels.

In Shōnagon, the movement of bodies is often the sign of time activated: in a life defined first and foremost by uneventfulness, the arrival of someone is always an occasion to pass the time pleasantly or, at the very least, interestingly. Against those "Occasions when the time drags by," she notes that "when a man turns up who has a talent for being amusing and clever, you'll always ask him in even though you're under abstinence restrictions."²⁵² Yet, despite her many protests at having nothing to entertain herself with or with always waiting for something to happen, her idealised world is one where time moves in circles but never forward. In Shōnagon's utopia, time has forcefully been made to come to a standstill in order to avoid the tragedy of history – we may recall that *The Pillow Book* had been explicitly set against, in its origin tale, the male court's copying of historical records. If episodes such as the visitor above can be plucked from the timeline of events and be regarded almost as a painting on a screen, in real life time is synonymous with death and loss:

After the Regent had departed this life, certain events were set in train in the world. There was considerable upheaval and commotion, and Her Majesty left the palace and moved to

²⁵² *The Pillow Book*, p. 140.

the Konijō mansion. Things felt rather difficult for me at this time, so I retired to my home for a lengthy period.²⁵³

The time of arriving visitors is a time of the list, an illusion of timelessness. The time of the Regent's death is narrative historical time, where some events set others in irreversible motion. Naomi Fukumori has made the case for the interpretation of Shōnagon's text as a political work of oneiric deliverance – a utopia – by showing how a number of disjointed episodes (such as the one above) conform to the history of Teishi's decline, although they avert their gaze from the tragedy itself. McKinney identifies a similar purpose in Shōnagon's use of the flexibility of Japanese grammatical structures to confuse verbal tenses, noting that

[t]his characteristic of the language is perfect for Sei Shōnagon's purposes. Although there are occasions when a sudden past inflection will ground the scene inside personal reminiscence, by and large the world she gives us is, quite literally, timeless. (...) we find ourselves inside [a scene] without any idea of whether it is describing something that she herself once experienced, or that people of sensibility may well experience, or that we are experiencing through the medium of a romanticized scene from a tale.²⁵⁴

This project of an illusion of timelessness via spatialisation is present in *The Pillow Book* since its first two lists: the four seasons and their marvels and the "times of the year" (which includes months, days, and celebrations). By virtue of being written as a list, time is anatomised, mapped, and rendered freely traversable,²⁵⁵ and the mode of the list contributes, in this way, to Shōnagon's project of inventorising a new aesthetic order capable of trumping the passage of time while shielding itself from outside criticism.

Digression here plays a crucial role in diverting attention from the sequential order of the presentation of months and any lingering impression that they should represent chronology: Shōnagon interrupts herself by exclaiming that "in fact every month according to its season, the

²⁵³ *The Pillow Book*, p. 143.

²⁵⁴ Meredith McKinney. *Op. cit.*, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

²⁵⁵ Jack Goody. *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

year round, is delightful.”²⁵⁶ The first rule of the new order of things in the utopia of *The Pillow Book* is that it cannot be apprehended in a regular temporal frame. Narrative halts, digression and the list democratise and flatten all items, and one is free to move into any time of the year which, in any case, is as equally as wonderful as any other, onto “a kind of loiterly or dilatory space where teleological progress is suspended.”²⁵⁷

Scott treats Shōnagon’s digressive style as a literary reenactment of the traditional practice of the “directional taboo,” which forced *The Pillow Book* “to retreat from history and politics,” while Morris had already noted how the courtly practice of directional taboos had the tangential effect of putting “a further brake on the already slow pace of life.”²⁵⁸ In effect, Shōnagon’s lists often curate a kind of escape route through digression, particularly when the taboos of the passing of time into aesthetic decay become the focus of her musings. “Splendid things,” for example, begins with a *staccato* of decorative objects, such as a “Chinese brocade. Ornamental Swords. Tinted Buddhist images.” The fifth item – “a Chamberlain of the sixth rank” – triggers a long digression, in which Shōnagon reflects on the brief career of the Chamberlain. By the end of this long entry, the tone is not anymore that of splendid things but rather of things that were once splendid in the old days. Historical time and the destruction it brings push against the fragile atemporal space of the list. Quickly, Shōnagon digresses again, just as her timeless joy verges on a social critique of customs:

As the time of the Appointments List Approaches and his period as Chamberlain is drawing to an end, he should already be dreading the loss of his special status more than death itself (...) in the old days, Chamberlains would already be lamenting the end of their service from the spring or summer of the year before it was due to finish, but these days they just rush to compete for their next position.

A man of scholarly accomplishment is inexpressibly splendid.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ *The Pillow Book*, p. 3.

²⁵⁷ Bede Scott. “‘Every Trivial Little Thing’: Sei Shōnagon and the Poetics of Insignificance.” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 28.1 (2013), pp. 102-3.

²⁵⁸ Ivan Morris. *Op. cit.*, p. 139.

²⁵⁹ *The Pillow Book*, p. 86.

Shortly after, the list returns to the detached rhythm of the first four items. For all the inward movement that scrutinises and anatomises the rubric of splendiddness, the reader is explicitly reminded by the use of the word “inexpressible” that we are in the realm of the ineffability *topos*. Shōnagon’s prose, however, makes us doubt whether ‘splendiddness’ is really beyond her ability to express, or merely placed where expression cannot reach, in order to be kept and guarded by a political death brought about by expression itself.

Browne is less ambiguous towards history. To him, progress is mostly positive as it means either the increased accuracy of scientific knowledge or the inexorable (but desirable) approach of the final days. However, if divine judgement does not frighten him, there is a temporal mode upon which treads carefully: the time of rational, human, judgement, which in, a rhetorical sense, is translated into the causal logic that flows from arguments into conclusions. Unlike (a century later) Diderot’s, Browne’s encyclopaedia eschews a programmatic necessity to “orient further progress.” Often running in circles only to arrive at purposefully engendered dead-ends, he does not share with the organiser of the *Encyclopédie* a similar confidence that “future generations will be able to construct a better encyclopaedia on the basis of his” by sheer accumulative power.²⁶⁰ Accordingly, the final chapter of *Pseudodoxia* (ominously titled “of some relations whose truth we feare”) reverses the text’s previous methodology. Rather than shining a disintegrating light on error, Browne ends his text by submerging the work in a mirror of itself, underlining that even what is real can be wrong, just as errors can contain a portion of the real. A litany of opening sentences such as “we cannot but fear it may be true,” “I am heartily sorry, and wish it were not true,” or simply “I hope it is not true” – while referring to topics such as murder or necrophilia – underlines this idea. The final chapter solidifies *Pseudodoxia* as a sort of anti-encyclopaedia, whose “injunction to forget”²⁶¹ was spelled already in the first pages: “knowledge is,” Browne writes, “made by

²⁶⁰ Hans Blumenberg. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999, p. 237.

²⁶¹ Claire Preston. *Op. cit.*, p. 121.

oblivion.”²⁶² One of the many ironies of *Pseudodoxia* is its approach to curiosity (so distant from Diderot’s) as a permanent post-lapsarian double-bind, for though it had been “the original taint in human nature, only reciprocal, devotional intellectual curiosity can repair its mortal damage.”²⁶³

This ambiguous position to mankind’s knowing finds solace in digression as an epistemological method, with the list as its prized form. In the short essay “of the pictures of dolphins”²⁶⁴ – concerning the common error which affirms that dolphins, and thus their depictions, are crooked, while “ocular enquiry informeth” that they are in fact straight – this methodology is amply displayed. While the problem and its correction seem simple enough, Browne’s real issue is with the nature of inquiry itself. As such, what he offers us in this entry is not only a logical argument proving that dolphins must be straight, or that they should be correctly depicted as such in images, but a list of alternative ways of looking at the world by which dolphins *do* become curved: this can happen “emphatically” rather than “really,” since when they leap dolphins can move so quickly as to induce a “fallacy in vision,” and hence appear curved. Or one can opt to take it really, but not “universally” or “perpetually,” which is to say that dolphins sometimes are curved and sometimes are not. Finally, one can regard the image “emblematically,” for in order to better express the notion of swiftness associated with the dolphin, its representation must be curved. The final paragraph digresses from the question entirely, and Browne ends up lecturing the reader, using the example of a picture of a dolphin clasping an anchor, on how to correctly read emblems.

“In a culture whose obsession with, and occasional phobia of, images [which] led to intense conflict at both local and national levels,”²⁶⁵ to return to Kileen’s words, Browne’s digressive approach is always concerned with avoiding lapsing into the natural conclusion of arguments: final unequivocal judgement. The “*Pseudodoxia*,” Kileen adds, “does not exhibit any rapturous and

²⁶² *Pseudodoxia*, p. 3.

²⁶³ Claire Preston. *Loc. cit.*

²⁶⁴ *Pseudodoxia*, pp. 340-1.

²⁶⁵ Kevin Kileen. *Op. cit.*, p. 189.

emotive response to beauty because, in 1646, this more reticent stance was a prudent and contingent response to the unprecedented iconoclastic and political turmoil.”²⁶⁶ As it had been the case with Shōnagon when considering his writing style, one cannot dissociate it from an “accommodation to the dangers of writing against a dominant politics.”²⁶⁷ Browne’s digressive modesty or reticence is, like the Heian courtier’s, an act of concealing what he understands to be the fundamentally autobiographical nature of his encyclopaedia. He is thus prone to use mottos such as “*hoc tantum scio, quod nihil scio*”²⁶⁸ (“I know this much, that I know nothing”) while never actually hiding his knowledge, opting instead to remain “modest about the way in which he knows it.”²⁶⁹ The “civil framework” that structures the work itself derives its authoritative power – the autonomy of its world – from the polite concealment of the workings of the framework itself.²⁷⁰

As the examples above show, digression is, in Browne and Shōnagon’s hands, an instrument towards the affirmation of both literary and political freedom. In this regard, it echoes Schlegel’s observation on the fundamentally political role of the arbitrary suppression of literary discourse, the importance of curating a “permanent parabasis:” “even a friendly conversation,” Schlegel writes, “that cannot break off at any moment, with absolute arbitrariness, has something illiberal.”²⁷¹ By never clearly demarcating what is inside or outside of the discussion – and referring those guidelines to abstract subjectivism or communalism –, both texts toy with digression as total freedom in order to trivialise everything or, at the very least, resist the impulse to identify the essential within the trivial. Digression as promoter of a flat ontology performs the work of

²⁶⁶ *Idem*, p. 199.

²⁶⁷ William N. West. *Op. cit.*, p. 169.

²⁶⁸ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 38.

²⁶⁹ Claire Preston. *Op. cit.*, p. 83.

²⁷⁰ There is here a suggestion of Stanley Fish’s approach to Browne’s text as a “self-consuming artifact,” although we obviously do not follow him all the way to his conception of Browne’s stylistic devices as anaesthetics. See Stanley Fish. *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.

²⁷¹ Michel Chaouli. “The Politics of Permanent Parabasis” *SiR* 42 (2003), p. 338.

misdirection, of continuous uncompromising allusion which safeguards political and literary freedom.

The ground for this freedom had been set by the complex dynamics of the inventory technique: this mode of inconclusive digression, if it is to work convincingly, requires both a non-linear space upon which one is free to digress into anything else as well as a deliverance from the causal and temporal mechanisms which organise thought along logical argument chains. The latter, bound to the kind of subjective organising impulses of the list-maker, had required the kind of vehement abolishment of subjectivity which their programmatic apologies, together with the list's paradigmatic and digressive functions, help to engender. The *invenire* of the inventory technique, in other words, is deployed exactly in accordance to terms which suit Browne and Shōnagon: as a way of devising worlds upon which their prose moves with total freedom, shielded, to a degree, from outside critique. However, their approaches to digression differ on a critical matter regarding the construction of lists: should digression include or exclude items? That Shōnagon often includes in order to exclude, or that Browne does the reverse, merely shows to what degree the freedom to walk in this new literary space must be still bound to some kind of ruling.

The Pillow Book is filled with this explicit misdirection, as if terrible things are purposefully alluded to only to be banished from the list. Thus, in a list of “things that create a disturbance,” Shōnagon relates how “news arrive that a fire has broken out nearby.” Carefully, she quickly adds: “in the instance I’m thinking of, however, the fire didn’t take hold.”²⁷² Mysteriously, even those “things that no one notices” belong in this list, but are not to be brought into view: they are explicitly named as things better left outside of Shōnagon’s literary utopia, such as “all the inauspicious days” or “ageing.”²⁷³ This paradoxical variation on the digressive technique names and lists only to make clear that what it includes is meant to be excluded – the trivial and the essential as

²⁷² *The Pillow Book*, pp. 203-4.

²⁷³ *The Pillow Book*, p. 205.

categories for what is literarily meaningful are cast away. In this way, the danger of the list's all-inclusivity is addressed by Shōnagon via a – arguably ineffective – preemptive and apologetic counter:

[134] *Worthless things* – Someone who's both ugly and unpleasant. Clothing starch that's gone bad – I know an awful lot of people hate this, but that's no reason why I shouldn't note it here.

And why should I avoid mentioning here the fire tongs that are burned in the post-funeral fire? After all, these are things that exist in the world. I never intended this book to be seen by others, so I've written whatever came into my mind, without worrying about whether people would find it strange or unpleasant.²⁷⁴

Her lists often expand in order to include in the rubric what should not have been there in the first place. Shōnagon often makes use of a variation of the *topos* of ineffability such as when, in a list of “moving things” she begins to narrate a story within an item, concluding it by stating that “this story isn't related to the topic of ‘moving things’, I've just added it because of the connection to the Mitake austerities.”²⁷⁵ The excuse comes at the precise moment when the digression could have threatened the integrity of the list and serves itself as a digression back to the regular progression of the items.

Browne, on the other hand, is much more wary of the dangers of inclusivity, of mere allusion. Often, he turns precisely to metaphors of distance and traversal of space, to indicate those areas which, in the “America of truth” one should not venture into:

Now if any shall say that these are petty errors and minor lapses not considerably injurious unto truth, yet is it neither reasonable nor safe to condemn inferiour falsities; but rather as between falshood and truth, there is no medium, so should they *be maintained in their distances*: nor the contagion of the one, approach the sincerity of the other.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁴ *The Pillow Book*, p. 140.

²⁷⁵ *The Pillow Book*, p. 120.

²⁷⁶ *Pseudodoxia*, pp. 366-7. My emphasis.

The problem of the list, as Browne understands it, lies in the intense tendency towards paradigmatic constructions. In other words, the list contaminates (and is contaminated by) whatever it touches by virtue of having little need for logical intra-connectivity. This power to contaminate at the slightest touch is evident in Browne's own use of it, and he is quick to deploy it to rhetorical effect, as in the previous example of Abraham and Isaac.

The difference in styles can be seen by comparing Browne's careful, circling, digressions, and Ross's willingness to conjure new objects out of thin air:²⁷⁷ while arguing against Browne's assertion that garlic does not hinder the effects of the loadstone (which the doctor claims to have tested himself), Ross proposes that the Ancients "had a stronger kind of garlick, then is with us, which made *Horace* write so invectively against it."²⁷⁸ A strange, baseless, argument by any measure, the kind that Browne is obsessively careful to avoid. Once again turning to the list also for a paradigmatic historical argument – regarding the question of whether Jesus and the disciples should be depicted sitting or lying down – he deploys a long list in order to evade the creation of any "garlicks," always careful to stay in the realm of what is probable or plausible:

Wherein restraining no mans enquiry, it will appear that accubation, or lying down at meals was a gesture used by very many Nations. That the *Persians* used it, beside the testimony of humane Writers, is deducible from that passage in *Esther*. That when the Kinds returned unto the place of the banquet of wine, *Haman* was fallen upon the bed whereon *Esther* was. That the *Parthians* used it, is evident from *Athenæus*, who delivereth out of *Possidonius*, that their King lay down at meals, on an higher bed then others. That *Cleopatra* thus entertained *Anthony*, the same Author manifesteth when he saith, she prepared twelve Tricliniums. That it was in use among the *Greeks*, the word Triclinium implieth, and the same is also declarable from many places in the Symposiacks of *Plutarch*. That it was not out of fashion in the days of *Aristotle*, he

²⁷⁷ Yet, Ross knows to use the list's paradigmatic mode in order to accuse Browne of heresy. In his "catalogue of heretical popes," writes James N. Wise, he "includes fourteen men who have, ever since their reigns, aroused controversy of one kind or another. While Ross could not prove Browne guilty of any of their supposed heresies, he could taint Browne with guilt by association in vaguely relating him to all of them." James N. Wise. *Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici and Two Seventeenth-Century Critics*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973, p. 129.

²⁷⁸ Alexander Ross. *Arcana Microcosmi: or, The Hid Secrets of Man's Body Discovered*. London: 1652, p. 192.

declareth in his politicks; when among the Institutionary rules of youth, he adviseth they might not be permitted to heare Iambicks and Tragedies before they were admitted unto discumbency or lying along with others at their meals. That the *Romans* used this gesture at repast, beside many more, is evident from *Lipsius*, *Mercurialis*, *Salmasius*, and *Ciaconius*, who have expresly and distinctly treated hereof.²⁷⁹

The main question is never answered – no new object is arrived at. Perhaps, possibly, probably – that is the minimum distance that Browne’s digressive thought allows for.

In another discussion, Browne makes this notion even clearer, while drawing close to the theological forbidden areas of creative biblical exegesis. Confronting the notion that Jesus had never laughed, since “in holy Scripture it is recorded he sometimes wept, but never that he laughed,” he considers this idea unlikely, observing that it is “not reasonable to conclude from scripture negatively in points which are not matter of faith.”²⁸⁰ Of course, this last point was wont to volatile arguing, but Browne merely seeks refuge in the empty space created by his own digression – because and despite the Bible *not* saying it, Jesus *in all likelihood* laughed.

In his essay “On Dreams” he elaborates on his concern with maintaining a proper distance and on the sinful nature of freedom of thought, draping his reflections on the metaphors of *invenire*. Thus, regarding the “phantasticall spirit, whose *unruly wandrings* takes of inward sleepe,” he considers whether sinning in one’s sleep can be equated to sinning while awake:

Death alone, not sleepe, is able to putt an end unto sinne, & there may bee a night book of our Iniquities; for beside the transgressions of the day, casuists will tell us of mortall sinnes in dreames arising from evil precogitations; meanwhile human lawe regards not noctambulos; and if a night walker should breacke his neck, or kill a man, takes no notice of it.²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 348.

²⁸⁰ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 529.

²⁸¹ Thomas Browne. “On Dreams” *Works III*, p. 233.

“Inclusiveness,” in *Pseudodoxia*, might come “before rightness.”²⁸² But its use is careful and contained, directed towards the ontological flattening of the distinctions between essential and trivial or error and truth – to “not only expose error, but to some sense promote it as well.”²⁸³

Sei Shōnagon and Thomas Browne both fashion a utopian realm by acting as its inventories. The inventory, they understand, is a fundamentally sensorial technique – it requires things seen by an inventory. If the inventoried world should be stable, the inventorier, on the other hand, should have as much freedom as possible. The freedom to traverse it however they desire, to show and to conceal at will is a fundamental right which, to the two authors, is also political. Moreover, stability itself was a particular requirement of their invented worlds: as political statements against what they perceived as radicalism, Browne and Shōnagon must conjure stable worlds, for that is, essentially, what branded them as utopias within their contexts. The structure and construction of their lists reveal a profound concern with the implications of walking in such a world. To them, digressive list-making is an invention of a new form of walking, one that can navigate all the incongruities of their project and its dangers of literary inconsistency, all while shielding them from a very real outside danger. To create a world by walking upon it, all while pretending that the walker merely shows what was already there. Or, perhaps provocatively, to count rather than recounting.

²⁸² William N. West. *Op. cit.*, p. 178.

²⁸³ *Idem*, p. 176.

I.2. Friendship, Finance, Flaubert: The Double-List and the Double-Protagonist

At last Frog came back to Toad. "I am sorry," gasped Frog, "but I could not catch your list."
"Blah," said Toad. "I cannot remember any of the things that were on my list of things to do. I will just have to sit
here and do nothing," said Toad.
Toad sat and did nothing. Frog sat with him.
 — Frog and Toad Together, *Arnold Lobel*

As we poured over the mechanisms behind the proliferation of items in *The Pillow Book* and *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, so will this section concern the production of variation, with the ways of elaborating on a central rubric and furnishing a list. The constant flirt with digression of Gustave Flaubert's last and unfinished novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* has been a source of despair for its critics since its publication. To account for this mysterious work – to even work on it – is sometimes taken as an esoteric proposal; as Mark Polizzotti writes, one must enter it accepting "the ground rules."²⁸⁴ But knowing what those are in the first place is no easy task.

In this chapter, we will attempt to identify *Bouvard's* clear list-structure and coherence amidst the novel's superficial chaos. Particularly, we will follow up on the investigation of the role of digression in lists, concerning ourselves with the dynamics of item generation particular to Flaubert's text. Finally, we will propose an alternative reading of the central themes of *Bouvard*, proposing and taking into account its list-structure as their mimetic counterpart, and showing that this theme is inextricable from the novel's organisational principle. To do this, we take a closer look at a sub-variant of the list – the double-list – which drastically differs from what we have encountered so far.

²⁸⁴ Mark Polizzotti. "Stan and Ollie in the Lab." *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005. eBook.

Following the analysis of Shōnagon and Browne's works, we have understood digression as a fundamental rhetorical device of item production within the list. We have also seen how it requires a sort of blind spot – a fulcrum of semantic and ontological ineffability – which the list can digress *around*. In list terms, we might say that the digression – the proliferation of items – occurs in relation to the blind spot – the rubric; the lists of *The Pillow Book* and *Pseudodoxia* digress around the blind spots of utopia. What can we consider as the blind spot of *Bouvard*, as its central rubric around which the digressions of the list concrete? What notion upholds, in other words, the silent task of accumulation?

The change of subjects in *Bouvard* is often so surprising, shocking, and humorous on account of its incongruity, that one is tempted to associate it to one of two options: either does chance dictates what the friends dedicate themselves to or perhaps something like a mysterious, personal, and ineffable quality such as curiosity. However, two questions and observations trouble this view, and require a more careful study of the novel in order to fruitfully compare it to the previous examples. Firstly, *Bouvard's* digressions are not wholly – or only – organised around the subjective whim of curiosity, following, at times, a strict narrative and binary logic whose careful orchestration survives both in the novel and in the manuscripts. What, then, is the logic of the list in *Bouvard*? Secondly, a blind spot of the kind we identified for Browne and Shōnagon is not so apparent in the case of Flaubert's text. To what degree did the literary representation of a particular theme might have been perceived as dangerous and requiring digression by the author?

In a genetic analysis of the Christmas chapter (XVIII), Jacques Neefs convincingly disproves the strictly arbitrary nature of the digressive turns of *Bouvard's* narrative. To paraphrase his words, a better description of the unfolding of the novel's episodes would be that, on some occasions, great thematic shifts – such as going, for example, from the making of preserves to the study of chemistry

– are indeed aleatory, or maintain only the faintest traces of narrative causal logic. In such moments of transition, we discern the same kind of logic of Browne or Shōnagon, whose operative laws are left unaccounted for.

At other times, Neefs underlines, the jumps from one opinion to the other within the same subject end up reflecting instead a binary conception of Western science and history embodied by the double protagonist. The ensuing dramatisation of thought²⁸⁵ gradually divides the trove of encyclopaedic knowledge gathered by Flaubert neatly among two categories: “Bouvard” or “Pécuchet.” Performing, as they always do, their fleeting objects of study, the friends unwittingly represent a play of alternatively symmetrical teleological understandings of knowledge and the history of philosophy:²⁸⁶

Bouvard tirait ses arguments de La Mettrie, de Locke, d’Helvétius ; Pécuchet de M. Cousin, Thomas Reid et Gérando. Le premier s’attachait à l’expérience, l’idéal était tout pour le second. Il y avait de l’Aristote dans celui-ci, du Platon dans celui-là, et ils discutent.²⁸⁷

Such lists hide a double narrative of Western philosophy, tracing its contemporary practitioners to either Aristotle or Plato. Moreover, we cannot say that the paragraph above represents a single instance of a list. Rather, we are confronted with two distinct lists, two parallel categories which are to be filled with corresponding information. The monotonous, almost mechanical task of filling either the “Bouvard” or “Pécuchet” categories is echoed in the words “celui-ci (...) celui-là.” We hear in Flaubert’s cadence that of a clerk who unreasoningly checks data against data. However, throughout the work, the problem of the accumulation of items and the intellectual identity of each of its protagonists only grows more evident. As Jonathan Culler points out:

given two characters, one can rate them as similar or different on any conceivable matter, and the basic structural device of binary opposition thus enables one to carry on writing

²⁸⁵ Jacques Neefs. “La Nuit de Noël.” *Gustave Flaubert 3*. Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1988, p. 37.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 38.

²⁸⁷ *Bouvard*, p. 270.

for as long as one wishes. Whether the differences produced in the process are of any thematic importance is, of course, another question, and this problem is apparent from the very beginning of the novel.²⁸⁸

Triviality results from this boundless (“for as long as one wishes”) double accumulation: it rests on the impossibility of articulating *all* of the beliefs espoused by either Bouvard or Pécuchet across the plot and articulating them into a clear and coherent structure, into a sense of individual theme or character. Some of those elements inexorably remain classified as trivial.

To Culler, who similarly notes a particular binary incidence on the “plane of ideas,” such trivialisation contributes to the thematic concern of the work with the nullification of oppositions. The novel shows that while it is easily possible to identify opposing views, opting for one seems like a purely arbitrary matter.²⁸⁹ A certain understanding of blind spot could perhaps be seen to rely on this indeterminacy of the binary choice or, as Culler puts it succinctly, “the law of the excluded middle” as “the basic generative device of the book.”²⁹⁰ “La liste,” as a product of such a generation, “peut dramatiser visiblement l’espace des questions philosophiques.”²⁹¹ As such, we might say that, in the case of *Bouvard*, we are before a different and complex kind of list, with its own particular set of operational demands. It is necessary to query what kind of list – or lists – are generated by this excluded middle and its binary stricture; whether the “middle” it generates can even be considered to be excluded at all or rather becomes the principle to which everything converges.

Although the list in its basic form is usually composed of a single column – a single category articulated in relation to a single rubric – the double-list has both a long history as well as a ubiquitous presence in practices as widespread as its single-category cousin. One of the most recognisable forms of the double list is the *decisional balance sheet*, whose invention is credited to

²⁸⁸ Jonathan Culler. *The Uses of Uncertainty*. Aurora: The Davies Group, 2006, p. 125.

²⁸⁹ *Idem*, pp. 127-8.

²⁹⁰ *Idem*, p. 126.

²⁹¹ Jacques Neefs. *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

Benjamin Franklin, or, in its more popular moniker, the *pros and cons list*.²⁹² Because it is simpler, we will first consider the possibility of comparing it to *Bouvard's* structure. After considering why the comparison might be lacking, we shall move on to more complex double-lists – even if these precede Franklin's invention by almost three centuries.

In a 1772 letter to Joseph Priestley, who was tormented by a career dilemma, Franklin explained the reason for the difficulty in deciding on such cases: “they are difficult chiefly because while we have them under Consideration all the Reasons *pro* and *con* are not present to the Mind at the same time; but sometimes one Set present themselves, and at other times another, the first being out of Sight.”²⁹³ The impression of simultaneity of the list, reasoned Franklin, could thus be put to great use – via what he called an “equation” – against the confusion of chronological sequentiality. And (just as the list had its ancient written origins in the operational necessities of financial transactions) Franklin dubs his invention “Moral or Prudential Algebra,” underlining the conflicting hermeneutical sensibilities of the list as a mode of writing that offers the possibility of a deductive, mathematical, and numerical approach. Franklin takes great care to clarify how such a list is created and how one should interact with its items:

divide half a Sheet of Paper by a Line into two Columns, writing over the one Pro, and over the other Con. Then during three or four Days Consideration I put down under the different Heads short Hints of the different Motives that at different Times occur to me for or against the Measure. When I have thus got them all together in one View, I endeavour to estimate their respective Weights; and where I find two, one on each side, that seem equal, I strike them both out: If I find a Reason pro equal to some two Reasons con, I strike out the three. If I judge some two Reasons con equal to some three Reasons pro, I strike out the five; and thus proceeding I find at length where the Ballance lies; and if

²⁹² There is, of course, a whole world of multiple column list-structures. Different examples such as Origen's *Hexapla* or Eusebius' *Chronicle* are detailed in Anthony Grafton, Daniel Rosenberg. *Cartographies of Time: A History of the Timeline*. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010.

²⁹³ Benjamin Franklin. Letter to Joseph Priestley. 19 September 1772. <founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-19-02-0200>

after a Day or two of farther Consideration nothing new that is of Importance occurs on either side, I come to a Determination accordingly.²⁹⁴

Franklin's pros and cons list is strikingly strict regarding the instructions governing the removal of items, just as it is vague on how to generate new ones. The former is "algebraic," while the latter appeals to mood and whim. This is understandable given that the goal was to minimise, as Franklin claims, taking a "rash Step." As Flaubert writes in the *Dictionnaire*, "mathématiques: dessèchent le cœur,"²⁹⁵ so Franklin's goal was to curb emotion with the aid of mathematics. The final image, the "whole" which "lies before me," is judged according to "Ballance" – here a financial term just as much as moral. However, the operations of Franklin's list are more focused on manipulating the particular items for themselves, in their individual, subjective value, rather than focusing on any sort of *a priori* meaning from the system as a whole. The meaning is mathematically deduc(t)ed by the reduction of several items to one. *Bouvard's* case, however binary, is in this aspect diametrically opposite.

Flaubert, tormented by the generation of trivialities the writing of his work seemed to require, complained that the final text "n'aura de signification que par son ensemble,"²⁹⁶ meaning that a way to generate new items is much more important than a way to erase them. It is not the case of getting to a crucial balance or lack thereof by elimination, but precisely to preserve the whole picture and its eventual inaccuracies. Furthermore, the given method of subtraction constitutes another difference to *Bouvard's* conception of the interrelatedness of its binary categories. Franklin's list relies on a purely subjective equivalency of the individual terms: besides each pro or con not being associated with any specific one in the opposite column, their value is perceived only in relation to a total sum. In order to strike out "three Reasons pro" it is simply necessary to strike out any number of "Reasons con" which add up to three – it does not matter which specific ones. In *Bouvard*, on the

²⁹⁴ *Idem*.

²⁹⁵ *Bouvard*, p. 428.

²⁹⁶ Letter to Émile Zola. 5 October 1877.

other hand, each of the items, because they remain trivial in relation to the whole, carries a meaningful association *only* with its direct correspondent, with the item that the binary rule had generated. Aristotle is to Plato as “experience” is to the “idea” or as the pseudoscience of animal magnetism (which Bouvard excels at) is to a *séance* (which excites Pécuchet).

There seems to be no other sense to *Bouvard*’s method other than the following rule: as soon as one item is written in the ‘Bouvard’ category, its equivalent must be inscribed also in the ‘Pécuchet’ category. Unlike the pros and cons table, they have no other paradigmatic relationship; and since their sum is inconceivable, we are unable to subtract any items from the list in this way. Moreover (and here we find the crucial departure from the digressive style of Browne or Shōnagon), it is not that in *Bouvard* one entry simply suggests another (any other, as it was the case with the previous texts), but that it requires another for the sake of its own intelligibility. “Aristotle” only helps us to make sense of the novel in the sense that it is juxtaposed to “Plato.” *Bouvard* is nevertheless still a list, and double-lists are more than just Franklin’s table; the technique of double-entry bookkeeping (still in the financial realm) offers a suitable list-structure closer to the generation of items in Flaubert’s novel.²⁹⁷

The technique of double-entry bookkeeping, first codified in Europe by Venetian friar and mathematician Luca Pacioli, in the 1494 work *De Computis et Scripturis*, was chiefly concerned with the detection and rectification of errors in records of financial transactions. To put it briefly, double-entry bookkeeping refers to any system that requires an amount inscribed in one column – such as “debit” – to be automatically inscribed in a second column – “credit.” If the first one is a positive number, the second should be its additive inverse. An accountant who would like to understand whether all transactions have been properly recorded must simply add all values in each

²⁹⁷ We should note that there are certainly other double-lists with distinct operational principles: the list of “Good” and “Evil” in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, for example, departs from Franklin’s in the sense that each item has only corresponding item in the opposite column. However, both its moralistic and dialectical premises (the “Good” item must somehow *contradict* the “Evil” one) are still far away from how the double-list of Bouvard works. A closer example could be the double-list of insults in Rabelais’ *Gargantua et Pantagruel*’s third book, but here too the case is not exactly the same: the two giants’ list is, conversely, too chaotic – its only rule is to alternate between the speakers, with the items in each column bearing no paradigmatic relationship beyond the rubric of ‘insult.’

column and compare them. If they wield a similar result (their sum is zero) then they are balanced – hence the expression “to balance the books.” The invention, often overlooked, was nothing short of revolutionary.²⁹⁸

On a surface level, double-entry bookkeeping is much closer to how Flaubert announces new items in the novel. Not only are its aims more aligned with generation than subtraction, but the implied notion of balance rests on the premise of a unique correspondence between two entries on different columns. Naturally, all the numerical values can and should be added in the double-entry bookkeeping system, but the detection of an incongruity in the final result (an impossible scenario in Franklin’s method) signals the omission of one particular item, whose identity is quickly traced to its equivalent in the other column. In *Bouvard*, few such errors exist; it is instead the minute attention to the constant production of carefully corresponding items that calls one’s attention, as Culler remarks. Flaubert’s drafts for the final chapter and the speeches of the friends, once presented in a list, showcase well this symmetrical design, which we present here in their double-entry bookkeeping form, together with the examples in the philosophy episode.

Here, Culler’s doubts make themselves heard again. For even after presenting these items, it may seem unclear how it contributes to our understanding of the novel’s theme. While there is, nevertheless, an internal coherence to the choice of items – Pécuchet, for instance, gravitates towards Thomas Reid and Victor Cousin, both associated with Scottish Common Sense Realism –, this sympathy is never explained in any way that would dispel the impression of aleatoricity, and often fails to furnish an intelligible picture of the whole. In asking why couldn’t it be Bouvard manifesting a given opinion, it is often the reader who must supply a succinct portrait of Pécuchet

²⁹⁸ To enact a comparative dialogue with accounting techniques might be surprising given the novel’s curious reluctance to make its characters engage with the field of mathematics and economy. Many explanations have been proposed for the absence of the former (see Francisco González Fernández. “Le bourdon mathématique de Flaubert.” *Çédille, revista de estudios franceses* 18 (2020), pp. 162-99.). Regarding economy, perhaps (a tentative suggestion) even a modest knowledge of it would deter the downward spiral toward the financial ruin of the whole project; a key engine of the plot. Thus, it is crucial to keep Bouvard ignorant of the best way to invest his inherited fortune. The vagaries of the plot demand so: when Bouvard claims that, after the disaster that was their attempt at agriculture, they have to find ways to economise, Pécuchet’s financially unsound suggestion is that they dedicate themselves to arboriculture – “non pour le plaisir, mais comme spéculation.” (*Bouvard*, p. 213) – thus inaugurating a new chapter in their adventure.

Bouvard	Pécuchet
“Discours: familier” (300)	“Discours: pédantesque” (300)
“Bouvard voit l’avenir de l’Humanité en beau.” (301)	“Pécuchet voit l’avenir de l’Humanité en noir.” (300)
“L’Homme moderne est en progrès.” (301)	“L’homme moderne est amoindri et devenu une machine.” (300)
“L’Europe sera régénérée par l’Asie. La loi historique étant que la civilisation aille d’Orient en Occident, – le rôle de la Chine, – les deux humanités enfin seront fondues.” (301)	“Anarchie finale du genre humain (...) Impossibilité de la paix.” (300)
“On ira dans les astres, – et quand la terre sera usée, l’Humanité déménagera vers les étoiles.” (301)	“Fin du monde par la cessation du calorique.” (300)
La Mettrie, Locke, Helvétius	M. Cousin, Thomas Reid, Gérando
Aristotle	Plato

that could ground all his opinions. Arguably, this is an impossible task, all the more difficult given the accumulation of other incongruities: for example, Bouvard favours Julien Offray de la Mettrie, the author of *l’Homme Machine*. How should we read Pécuchet’s claim that man will become a machine in the future? It is certainly a philosophically distinct affirmation; and, perhaps, there is no contradiction at all. The problem, in any case, is that the text is never interested in juxtaposing any of these episodes, leaving the question of their total coherence up to the reader’s conjectures.

As in double-entry bookkeeping, the sole rule is that one item implies another – its corresponding opposite. Liam Cole Young, who approaches double-entry bookkeeping as one of the subsidiary techniques of the list, writes that such a strict methodology renders it an ontic operation standing before modern facticity²⁹⁹ – one of its many effects, at the epistemological level, is to engender a system of fact creation. By making use of the supposedly transparent language of numerical representation, formal precision becomes a guarantor of the accuracy of the representation as a whole. In Mary Poovey’s words: “the double-entry system seemed to guarantee

²⁹⁹ Liam Cole Young. *Op. cit.*, p. 95.

that the details it recorded were accurate reflections of the goods that had changed hands *because* the system was formally precise.”³⁰⁰

Accuracy, which in accounting terms was connected to the faithful representation of the wealth and transactions of the company (as well as the morality and trustfulness of its employees), can be translated into the sort of novelistic verisimilitude that Flaubert’s novel proposes, that is, the act of privileging a facticity of “things in themselves”³⁰¹ resulting from the precision of the system becomes an ontologising technique of the whole to which those elements belong. Obsessing over minute (and yet trivial) details of each character, one is convinced of the possibility of their otherwise improbable existence. The epistemological effect – and its troubles – is again quite similar in regards to either Venetian accounting books or *Bouvard*: in the end, the accuracy of the credibility of the company had no more connection to the real world than did the first impression of formal verisimilitude to the possibility of considering the characters of Bouvard or Pécuchet without losing sight of them in their “extreme existential thinness.”³⁰² This is not to suggest that *Bouvard* fails to describe something which exists, but that, more gravely, it often fails to describe something which *could* exist.

The frustration concerning the relation between particulars and the whole is all the more troubling in the literary realm, where the apparent transparency afforded by numerical language tends to be absent, and the terms of the relationship between the items all the more subject to conjecture. Concepts such as the negative equivalent of a number are lost in translation, even if, as one quickly notices, Flaubert’s naming of the couple is a linguistic play on the limit of such boundaries; their names seem carefully chosen to invoke the neurolinguistic effect known as Bouba/Kiki³⁰³ – described by Wolfgang Köhler in 1929; we know that Bouvard is the rotund one, Pécuchet

³⁰⁰ Mary Poovey. *History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 30.

³⁰¹ *Idem*, p. 29.

³⁰² Jonathan Culler. *Op. cit.*, p. 123.

³⁰³ Ramachandran, V.S.; Hubbard, E.M. “Synaesthesia: A Window Into Perception, Thought and Language.” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8.12 (2001), pp. 3–34.

the bony, purely because their names suggest this classification. And despite many other examples, however suggestive, “Bouvard sur le dos, la bouche ouverte, tête nue” can never in any strict mathematical sense be the inverse of “Pécuchet sur le flanc droit, les genoux au ventre, affublé d’un bonnet de coton.”³⁰⁴ As the novel becomes a repetition of this exercise *ad absurdum*, one could not be at fault for imagining Edmond Duranty’s criticism of *Madame Bovary* redirected at *Bouvard*:

Ce roman est un de ceux qui rappellent le dessin linéaire, tant il est fait au compas, avec minutie ; calculé, travaillé, tout à angles droits, et en définitive sec et aride. On a mis plusieurs années à le faire, dit-on. En effet les détails y sont comptés un à un, avec la même valeur ; (...) [il y a] une grande force d’arithméticien qui a supputé et rassemblé tout ce qu’il peut y avoir de gestes, de pas ou d’accidents de terrain.³⁰⁵

If *Madame Bovary* is a “livre de comptabilité,”³⁰⁶ *Bouvard* is nothing short of an accountant’s journal and ledger, as disconcerting to his contemporaries as it would become appealing to mathematically inclined writers such as Raymond Queneau.

The novel, in the end, is not mathematics, however mathematical its structure might be. If double-entry bookkeeping is concise and direct, *Bouvard* only accumulates hermeneutical tensions between particulars and the whole. At first sight, it seems, as Juliette Grange writes, that “entre les deux colonnes de certitudes égales, entre Bouvard et Pécuchet, il n’y a pas de *daimon*, pas d’espace intermédiaire métaxique.” She continues:

Les deux colonnes ne sont pas des contradictoires qui pourraient s’annuler, travailler l’une sur l’autre ; ce ne sont pas des équivalents qui puissent s’égaliser. On ne peut conclure à leur vérité simultanée, mais seulement à leur erreur conjointes. (...) Destins parallèles, situations semblables, mais irréductibles (...) Une hétérogénéité sans valeur efficace, sans résultat.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁴ *Bouvard*, p. 208.

³⁰⁵ Edmond Duranty *apud* Francisco González Fernández. *Op. cit.*, p. 170.

³⁰⁶ *Idem*.

³⁰⁷ Juliette Grange. “Les Deux Colonnes.” *Bouvard et Pécuchet centenaires*. Paris: La Bibliothèque d’Ornicar?, 1981, pp. 184, 178-9.

Such were the questions troubling Flaubert, who often agonised over the readability and interpretability of his work; questions intrinsically related to its structuring:

Ce sacré bouquin me fait vivre dans le tremblement! Il n'aura de signification que par son ensemble. Aucun morceau, rien de brillant. & toujours la même situation, dont il faut varier les aspects! J'ai peur que ce ne soit embêtant à crever.³⁰⁸

Just as no isolated fragment from the novel could be quotable – become a *morceau* –, the records of the double-entry bookkeeping system can produce only “meanings which transcend even the veracity of the individual entries” – they place emphasis on system over observed particulars.³⁰⁹ The novel will only make sense in its whole when everything can be brought together in one's view. If, by virtue of this system, Flaubert could seemingly produce endless words, its literary status would remain troubling. The cycle of triviality – further problematised by the non-mathematical qualities of literary language and the expectations of novelistic verisimilitude – engendered to produce a potentially pointless work; inaccurate, that is, because its particulars don't lend coherence to the whole, despite their mechanical precision. This anxiety – so well captured by Duranty's lateral critique – occupies large portions of Flaubert's correspondence. Thus, it is necessary to momentarily suspend this analysis of *Bouvard*, and address the last of the two points raised in the introduction: why was it necessary to craft such a strict system, and to what purpose did Flaubert labour to dutifully abide by it against both friendly advice and personal doubt?

Bouvard et Pécuchet à la Swift

The blind spot of *The Pillow Book* and *Pseudodoxia* is, as we have seen, directly related to matters of civility (as well as politeness, and etiquette) and safety. It was credible, in those cases, that such matters could transcend the textual realm to threaten the biological person of the authors –

³⁰⁸ Letter to Émile Zola. 5 October 1877.

³⁰⁹ Mary Poovey. *Op. cit.*, p. xvii.

apart from their social standing or literary and professional reputations. In their case, civility or etiquette justified and grounded a digressiveness which, in turn, provided the necessary distance to remain carefully respectful. At a first glance, Flaubert's case seems profoundly distinct. Excerpts from his correspondence point to a very different sensibility: "Je me débarrasserai," he writes in 1872, "enfin de ce qui m'étouffe. Je vomirai sur mes contemporains le dégoût qu'ils m'inspirent."³¹⁰ And five years later, amidst the writing process, the "bêtise" of his contemporaries would bring Flaubert again to the retching image: "Je tâcherai de vomir mon venin dans mon livre: cet espoir me soulage."³¹¹ One needs not to tire in search of other similar instances of an almost performative disregard for the style of etiquette and civility in the previous examples.

Naturally, Flaubert's case and world are altogether different. No real danger – not even comparable to the judicial perils that had followed the publication of *Madame Bovary* – could have been expected to transpire from the pages of *Bouvard*. And while his untimely passing does not allow us to accurately gauge the reactions to the full novel, we do wonder how it could have diverged significantly from the actual reception that followed the publication of *Bouvard*: a general sense of confusion and perplexity, and praise from a minority of "flaubertistes fanatiques."³¹² Even the closest circle of the writer's friends and their cursory defences of the unfinished novel reveal more an affection for the memory of their prestigious companion and mentor than a deep understanding of the complex object of their critique.³¹³

Were we to sketch the triangle of *digression – civility – rubric* for the current and previous chapters, the first problem regarding the nature of digression in *Bouvard* becomes apparent. What is the rubric of *Bouvard*? What is the literary danger it implies; is there one in the first place? The questions, as Flaubert elaborates in his letters, are deeply tied to the infrastructure of rhetorical

³¹⁰ Letter to Edma Roger des Genettes. 15 April 1875.

³¹¹ Letter to Edmond de Goncourt. 9 October 1877.

³¹² Albert Thibaudet. *Gustave Flaubert*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1982, p. 202.

³¹³ Stéphanie Dord-Crouslé. "Réception critique de *Bouvard et Pécuchet* à sa parution." *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Paris: Flammarion, 1999, p. 441.

dispositio. For besides *Bouvard*'s many apparent absences, and more notable than the lack of a clear theme or topic, none is more pressing than a coherent ending whose recuperative process one hopes should point us to it in the first place. Without an end, *Bouvard* wrestles the necessary "middle as detour, as struggle toward the end under the compulsion of imposed delay, as arabesque in the dilatory space of the text"³¹⁴ into its whole project. Which is to say that *Bouvard* clearly digresses, but to no clear end nor purpose.

If it is logical and expectable that the encyclopaedic texts of Shōnagon or Browne – and their encyclopaedic operative specificities – exclude a notion of end *a priori*,³¹⁵ *Bouvard* is not meant to be read in the same way. It is presented as a narrative work, grounded on novelistic precepts honed by Flaubert himself, and thus meant to be read as a whole, not simply fragmentarily consulted. The matter is more complex, however, when considering Flaubert's many doubts and indecisions regarding the appropriate genre and form for the project. He does refer to his work-in-progress as an encyclopaedia, or, more precisely, "une espèce d'encyclopédie critique en farce,"³¹⁶ all while considering the problems of the paradoxical nature of the envisioned work: "il faut un semblant d'action, une espèce d'histoire continue pour que la chose n'ait pas l'air d'une dissertation philosophique."³¹⁷ But then, how does one dramatise a list form? Who can be the hero of the dictionary?

Just as the discretely amiable prose of Browne and Shōnagon sought to tune down the sense of individuality which – nevertheless – issued forth veiled criticisms and challenges, Flaubert's image of the encyclopaedia as a literary model is well positioned, in the words of Gisèle Séginger, as "le projet d'un écrivain barbare;" an eminently impersonal form.³¹⁸ Albert Thibaudet similarly couches

³¹⁴ Peter Brooks. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. 107-8.

³¹⁵ Even if their respective ends, as we have seen, are in accordance the tone and theme of the texts, perhaps even lending them some superficial sense of closure.

³¹⁶ Letter to Edma Roger des Genettes. 19 August 1872.

³¹⁷ Letter to Edma Roger des Genettes. 15 April 1875.

³¹⁸ Gisèle Séginger. *Flaubert: une éthique de l'art pur*. Caen: Lettres Modernes Minard, 2010, p. 137.

the social dimensions of Flaubert's project within the confines of the impersonal form of the catalogue or the inventory:

Il faut que ce soit, conformément à l'esthétique de Flaubert, une œuvre impersonnelle. Il ne s'agira pas de déclamer contre la bêtise, mais de se soumettre à elle pour l'inventorier et la cataloguer, de se faire petit enfant à son école.³¹⁹

Yet, taking a cue from Thibaudet's words, it is hardly conceivable that one who submits can remain impersonal throughout. A few months before Flaubert's passing, he complains to Edma Roger des Genettes of the heavy duty he had imposed on himself: "savez-vous à combien se montent les volumes qu'il m'a fallu absorber [pour] mes deux bonshommes? À plus de 1500! Mon dossier de notes a huit pouces de hauteur"³²⁰ – a *superabundance* (perhaps on the verge of trivial excess) of documents, he adds. *Bouvard* becomes as dangerously digressive as its own writing process.

As a very immediate consequence of this process and conflict, Flaubert repeatedly engages in a play of being and not-being in his own work. It is not anymore the author ensconced in a safe distance, for example, that counterbalances the free indirect style of many episodes, such as the discussion on Beauty:

D'abord qu'est-ce que le Beau?

Pour Schelling c'est l'infini s'exprimant par le fini, pour Reid une qualité occulte, pour Jouffroy un trait indécomposable, pour de Maistre ce qui plaît à la vertu; pour le P. André, ce qui convient à la Raison.

Et il existe plusieurs sortes de Beau: un beau dans les sciences, la géométrie est belle, un beau dans les mœurs, on ne peut nier que la mort de Socrate ne soit belle. Un beau dans le règne animal. La Beauté du chien consiste dans son odorat. Un cochon ne saurait être beau, vu ses habitudes immondes; un serpent non plus, car il éveille en nous des idées de bassesse.³²¹

³¹⁹ Albert Thibaudet. *Op. cit.*, p. 205.

³²⁰ Letter to Edma Roger des Genettes. 24 January 1880.

³²¹ *Bouvard*, p. 248.

In excerpts like this, it is Flaubert as reader, notetaker, and collector of encyclopaedic fragments, whose titanic effort cannot but emerge fully into view, as narrative morphs into encyclopaedia and then into list. Such cases, Frances Ferguson underlines, require a generous dose of our imagining the two characters saying in dialogue what is presented as plain enumeration. It might be that the compositional clumsiness of *Bouvard* is indeed “so pervasive that one can no longer doubt its role as a deliberate distancing device.”³²² Yet, conversely, it is not just that in excerpts such as the one above “it becomes impossible to differentiate their statements from the full range of their sources”³²³ but that the supposedly impersonal form of the encyclopaedia cannot anymore be differentiated from the authorial personage itself:

Faire un roman, comme c’est le cas avec Bouvard et Pécuchet, avec l’expérience des livres, des savoirs, des idées, des théories, des opinions, mais dans le tissu vivant des passions, des envies, des lassitudes, des désespoirs et des sursauts, c’était donner une visibilité toute proche à l’activité de l’écrivain lui-même.³²⁴

That Flaubert had briefly considered that *Bouvard’s* subtitle could be the more essayistic “Du défaut de méthode dans les sciences”³²⁵ – closer to the “dissertation philosophique” – further adds to the problem of conflicting genres also as conflicting degrees of personalisation. Flaubert’s effort to dramatise his dictionary (to farce-ify the encyclopaedia), put him in a position that is now dangerously distant from the relative comfort of Browne or Shōnagon. Eschewing the form of the essay and its advantages, Flaubert misses the distance and modesty afforded to the essayist³²⁶ (missing also the appearance of effortlessness of Shōnagon, for example) and the cataloguer.³²⁷

³²² Jonathan Culler. *Op. cit.*, p. 205.

³²³ Frances Ferguson. “Too Much Information: Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet*.” *MLN* 125.4 (September 2010), p. 788.

³²⁴ Jacques Neefs. *Op. cit.*, pp. 35-6. Raymond Queneau makes a similar remark in his revised preface to the novel: “La nécessité dans laquelle il se trouve de refaire avec eux leur périple encyclopédique – il lut, dit-il, *plus de quinze cents volumes* dans ce but – n’a pu que confirmer cette identification.” See Raymond Queneau. “*Bouvard et Pécuchet*.” *Bâtons, chiffres et lettres*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1965, p. 110.

³²⁵ Letter to Gertrude Tennant Collier. 16 December 1879.

³²⁶ Georg Lukács. *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

³²⁷ Benjamin Sammons. *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

We should briefly consider the possibility that the distancing effort may ultimately rely on the ironic and literally distant point of view which is adopted many times throughout the novel, as in this example of the gymnastics ordeal:

Ensuite, ils recherchèrent des fossés. Quand ils en avaient trouvé un à leur convenance, ils appuyaient au milieu une longue perche, s'élançaient du pied gauche, atteignaient l'autre bord, puis recommençaient. La campagne étant plate, on les apercevait au loin; – et les villageois se demandaient quelles étaient ces deux choses extraordinaires, bondissant à l'horizon.³²⁸

But this specific style of an apparent critical distance is not in accordance with Flaubert's own thoughts on the gradual approximation between the heroes and himself, throughout their learning adventure: "Bouvard et Pécuchet m'emplissent à tel point que je suis devenu eux!", he admits, "leur bêtise est mienne et j'en crève."³²⁹ And again, to his niece, "la bêtise de mes deux bonshommes m'envahit."³³⁰ It is indeed, observes Queneau, a commonplace of Bouvard-and-Pécuchetian exegesis³³¹ to believe that during the writing process, the character of Bouvard or Pécuchet changed and progressed towards a superior critical nature increasingly mirroring that of Flaubert.³³² Such proposals tend to rely on excerpts such as "alors, une faculté pitoyable se développa dans leur esprit, celle de voir la bêtise et de ne plus la tolérer,"³³³ which seem to echo Flaubert's stated motives for wanting to write the book in the first place. But regardless of how we might choose to read such excerpts, the final chapter is quite clear on the matter of the intellectual progress of the two friends: "*Discours de Pécuchet*, pédantesque. (...) *Discours de Bouvard*, familier."³³⁴ Still, it is hardly possible to credibly place Flaubert in the mindset of the villager who repeatedly looks in

³²⁸ *Bouvard*, p. 262.

³²⁹ Letter to Edma Roger des Genettes. 15 April 1875.

³³⁰ Letter to his niece Caroline. 21 August 1874.

³³¹ Raymond Queneau. *Op. cit.*, p. 102.

³³² Albert Thibaudet. *Op. cit.*, p. 210.

³³³ *Bouvard*, p. 275.

³³⁴ *Bouvard*, p. 300.

disbelief at the friends. A more literal approach to the excerpts in the correspondence suggests the opposite process: the unchanging nature of his literary creations invaded Flaubert's spirit to such a degree that while it was still possible to consider their ridiculous appearance from afar, the reason and disposition of character to engage in those activities in the first place were inevitably closer than they appeared. Or, to insist on Flaubert the book collector and Bouvard and Pécuchet as his "little genii," he lives, and disappeared, in them.³³⁵

Throughout the novel, as well as in his correspondence, Flaubert alludes to a paradox of presence and distance, a being and not-being within his own work. "L'auteur, dans son œuvre," he writes two decades before, "doit être comme Dieu dans l'univers, présent partout, et visible nulle part."³³⁶ If so much of what contributes to *Bouvard*'s confusion regarding its digressive structure – the style, genre, structure, research process – becomes inevitably tied to questions regarding the construction of selfhood, of characters, and its relation to literary representation, it might then be productive to consider directly what role the trivial might play in relation to selfhood itself – and what the novel might have to say about it. Before that, however, we will conclude the analysis of the production of trivialities in *Bouvard*, Flaubert's obsession with them, and the degree to which they might shed light on the notion of literary danger as Flaubert saw it.

In *Bouvard*, this confusion arises out of a rhetorical incompatibility between the delineated objective and the chosen form. Its digressive style is also the result of the mediation (by the double-entry bookkeeping technique) between the superabundance of research material and the two categories of the friends (Bouvard or Pécuchet). Such a technique allows one to write "for as long as one wishes" but imposes little limits on when to stop. Still, this is not yet the danger of *Bouvard*.

³³⁵ "For inside him there are spirits, or at least little genii, which have seen to it that for a collector – and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be – ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have with things. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them. So I have erected before you one of his dwellings, with books as the building stones; and now he is going to disappear inside, as is only fitting." Walter Benjamin. "Unpacking My Library." *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999, p. 492.

³³⁶ Letter to Louise Colet. 9 December 1852.

Writing to Ivan Turgenev, Flaubert gathers all of these pieces together, and to his friend's advice that such a topic should be addressed "presto, à la Swift, à la Voltaire", replies:

S'il est traité brièvement, d'une façon concise et légère, ce sera une fantaisie plus ou [moins] spirituelle, mais sans portée et sans vraisemblance, tandis qu'en détaillant et en développant, j'aurai l'air de croire à mon histoire, et on peut faire une chose sérieuse et même effrayante. *Le grand danger est la monotonie et l'ennui.*³³⁷

Novelistic verisimilitude, together with that kind of continuous action (i.e. narrative, causality and temporality), is regarded as essential to the project. But so are all the departures from the form which would assumedly be responsible for the dangers mentioned. Boredom and *ennui* are not surprising appearances in Flaubert's lexicon of *Bouvard's* composition. To Du Camp, who had asked for an explanation regarding the writing of an "encyclopaedia of stupidity," he expressed his wish to "produce such an impression of weariness and boredom that one might believe in reading the book that it had been written by an imbecile."³³⁸ The sense of danger previously expressed to Turgenev is expanded upon in other letters:

D'ailleurs c'est mon but (secret): ahurir tellement le lecteur qu'il en devienne fou. Mais mon but ne sera pas atteint, par la raison que le lecteur ne me lira pas. Il se sera endormi dès le commencement.³³⁹

Almost a year later, again to Zola, Flaubert summarises what becomes a literarily existential question, the real danger of all which is written: "sera-t-il seulement *lisible*?"³⁴⁰ *Ennui*, boredom, triviality; all of them orbit *Bouvard* as both threat and essence.

To further complicate matters – and although this early statement refers directly to the *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues* (which *Bouvard* should join as a narrative preface) –, the importance of the trivial is put in more ambitious social, even apocalyptic, terms:

³³⁷ Letter to Ivan Turgenev. 29 July 1874.

³³⁸ Jonathan Culler. *Op. cit.*, p. 163.

³³⁹ Letter to Leonie Brainne. 30 December 1878.

³⁴⁰ Letter to Émile Zola. 6 August 1878.

Il faudrait que, dans tout le cours du livre, il n'y eût pas un mot de mon cru, et qu'une fois qu'on l'aurait lu on n'osât plus parler de peur de dire naturellement une des phrases qui s'y trouvent.³⁴¹

Bouvard, then, was from very early on inscribed within a project which – like *The Pillow Book* or *Pseudodoxia* – was built on the social consciousness of its own deliberately disorienting reception. Flaubert often returns, in his various musings on the reception of the work, to careful considerations on the reader's opinion of the book and its author. In his literary apocalyptic intentions, the goal to end utterance itself is an invective against trivialities repeated in a social context, as well as those he collected from 'poor' literature – commonplaces of all sorts. The literary danger of *Bouvard* becomes gradually clearer: prising to such an extent the intrinsic ontological value of that which is truly original and individual (non-quotable), it is willing to flirt with a kind of self-immolation by *bêtise*. If the goal is to annul the possibility of trivial things to be spoken, Flaubert's method consists of exhaustively discovering and deploying all of those trivialities first, as if enacting a silencing patent on stupidity. To make emerge some degree of individuality – not to speak of characters – from such a project, is yet another entanglement of the *Bouvard* project.

This aspect is brought to the foreground at various points in the novel, each subject lending a distinct colouration to the problem. The most explicit case is the attempt to write the life of the Duke of Angoulême: unsatisfied with narrative historical subjectivity ("Il faut un choix. Mais dans le choix des documents, un certain esprit dominera; – et comme il varie, suivant les conditions de l'écrivain, jamais l'histoire ne sera fixée"³⁴²), the pair turns to biography writing, only to get lost in the whirlwind of details that compose an individual's character and history. As it had been with History *per se*, "les détails trop nombreux empêchaient de voir l'ensemble."³⁴³ At both a micro and macro scale, the novel threads the same ambiguous and fragile line. To briefly summarise the

³⁴¹ Letter to Louise Colet. 16 December 1852.

³⁴² *Bouvard*, p. 240

³⁴³ *Bouvard*, p. 238.

problem so far: only because it is both personal and impersonal could it possibly also wish to do away with all trivial utterances by relating nothing but trivialities. It requires the digressive production of a never-ending number of items whose disconnection from a vague hint of narrative logic renders them trivial. This digressive production is carefully supported by a precise double-entry bookkeeping system, safekeeping the promise of accuracy or, in Culler's words, an invitation "to make something" of this listing, perhaps, in this process, assigning an autonomous existence to the thing the system claims to represent. But the suggested significance of the narrative movements is undercut by their scarce "thematic importance," a "mocking" insignificance.³⁴⁴ While so much ontic weight is placed on the individual items, their coherence is lost on the whole, which they invite us to stare at in search of sense.

Perhaps, only the hero of a dictionary could be animated to produce nothing but trivialities, and yet, be expected to carry within him the possibility of individuality, of saying something meaningful. Still, *Bouvard's* suggestion manages to be even more alluring. For the literary application of the technique of double-entry bookkeeping creates not one but two heroes. Among many other things, the mirrored individual is also a friend. And friendship, as we will see, might be the real theme and engine of the novel, its rubric and final coherent catalogue. Is it not, in any case, one of the phenomena which so easily renders mere trivialities meaningful?

Accrochés par des Fibres Ennuyeuses

That the only real change in the characters of Bouvard or Pécuchet (and a frequent argument in favour of their changeability) is the episode of Pécuchet's abandonment of his *gilet de santé*,³⁴⁵ shows us that the only real change to their characters is from strangers to friends – and that this comprises their greatest achievement in a novel of purposeless repetitiveness. In Flaubert's drafts

³⁴⁴ Jonathan Culler. *Op. cit.*, pp. 125-7.

³⁴⁵ *Bouvard*, p. 204.

and plans for *Bouvard*, the notion of “amitié” is again and again rehearsed in different contexts, served by tentative adjectives, slowly made to crystallise into the most important and existential of the virtues. “Par le fait seul de leur amitié, ils se développent moralement désirent avoir plus d’idées [*sic*]”³⁴⁶ is turned into “par le fait seul de leur amitié, *ils se développent intellectuellement*.”³⁴⁷ Flaubert underlines the second part but erases it in a later draft. It eventually becomes “avant de se connaître, ils supportaient patiemment l’existence – & maintenant [...] elle était plus douce par le fait seul de leur amitié.”³⁴⁸ The gradual growth from moral, to intellectual, and finally to existential, indicates the theme’s growing importance in Flaubert’s plans.

Crucially, the indecision surrounding the exact wording concerning the effects of friendship is perhaps less remarkable than the constancy of friendship being the *sole cause* of such changes. What moves the pair’s curiosity is not the promise of learning: in the initial stasis which preceded their meeting on the boulevard Bourdon, they were already in possession of the emblematic objects of their intellectual adventure. The *Encyclopédie Roret*, the *Manuel de Magnétiseur*, and “un Fénelon” were part of Pécuchet’s personal library, while Bouvard’s bedroom contained objects that prophesied the other half of their quest: fancy furniture, liqueurs, and decorative bric-a-brac. Besides serving as yet another entry in the double-entry bookkeeping system which sustains the whole work, what these initial moments make explicit is that their latent curiosity is moved by the sight and encounter with the mirror-other, as they let themselves become infatuated not with the objects or the ideal of intellectual curiosity (which they already possessed to some degree), but with the particular way the significant other experiences and performs this curiosity. “*Vous m’ensorcelez, ma parole d’honneur!*”³⁴⁹ exclaims Pécuchet; not chemistry, museums, or any of those objects of

³⁴⁶ Gustave Flaubert. “Plan, folio 33.” *Bouvard et Pécuchet: Manuscrits de Bouvard et Pécuchet*. <flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/jet/public/trans.php?corpus=pecuchet&id=6768>.

³⁴⁷ Gustave Flaubert. “Plan, folio 7.” *Bouvard et Pécuchet: Manuscrits de Bouvard et Pécuchet*. <flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/jet/public/trans.php?corpus=pecuchet&id=6773>.

³⁴⁸ Gustave Flaubert. “Brouillons, vol 1, folio 32.” *Bouvard et Pécuchet: Manuscrits de Bouvard et Pécuchet*. <flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/jet/public/trans.php?corpus=pecuchet&id=6684>.

³⁴⁹ *Bouvard*, p. 203.

learning put Pécuchet under such a spell. *You*, he says to Bouvard, are the sole cause of such a will to change one's character. Flaubert seems to think along similar lines as Pécuchet: in a plan for the second chapter of the work he prepares a grand lyrical "mouvement" of exaltation of the character's friendship as the opening, noting that "l'amitié de deux hommes, tout ce qu'il y a de plus beau sur la terre;" The incipit should, Flaubert clarifies, colour tenderly whatever words should follow.³⁵⁰ There is little doubt that friendship was meant to be, if not the tonal centre of *Bouvard*, at least its opening chord.

As Nathaniel Wing underlines, Flaubert's novel would probably not exercise such a powerful attraction up to this day if it merely aimed "to negate everything in an affirmation of stupidity."³⁵¹ Yet, we have already noted how the affirmation of stupidity required not the negation of things but precisely an earnest affirmation of them as trivial. Moreover, as Michel Butor observes, what the reader follows in the work is the construction of an individual by way of another. "Chacun est le miroir de l'autre," he writes, adding that "se regardant l'un l'autre ils se font parler l'un l'autre."³⁵² This Aristotelian understanding of virtuous friendship³⁵³ is reenacted by the technique of double-entry bookkeeping – itself a technique of mirroring. Even more pressing than the affirmation of the trivial, is the way in which Bouvard and Pécuchet's friendship results in either of them routinely affirming each other; their activities as friends have the quality of bringing the friend into being. Thus they become characters, in the literary sense, and individuals, in the philosophical sense.

The aesthetic and philosophical notion of friendship would slowly lose any explicit mentions in the final manuscript. Only two, minor, survive: when Bouvard and Pécuchet embrace each other

³⁵⁰ Gustave Flaubert. "Plan, folio 41" *Bouvard et Pécuchet: Manuscrits de Bouvard et Pécuchet*. <flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/jet/public/trans.php?corpus=pecuchet&id=6816>.

³⁵¹ Nathaniel Wing. "Detail and Narrative Dalliance in Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*" *French Forum* 13.1 (1988), p. 48.

³⁵² Michel Butor. "A Propos de *Bouvard et Pécuchet*." *Improvisations sur Flaubert*. Paris: Le Sphinx, 1984, p. 196.

³⁵³ "This friendship then is perfect in point of time and in all other respects; and each friend receives from the other the same or nearly the same treatment in all respects, as ought to be the case. (...) It is in this way that, even where people are unequal, they may be friends, as they will be equalized. But equality and similarity constitute friendship." Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1987, pp. 261, 271.

after discovering that they both possess the phrenological bumps signifying “le penchant à l’amitié,”³⁵⁴ and when they decide to ignore women from then on, so as to preserve their friendship.³⁵⁵ The reasons for this choice might lie in the difficulties of the repetitive literary affirmation of friendship as an affirmation of the trivial, and the existential dangers it posed to the novel. Flaubert’s obsessive return to boredom, *ennui*, and monotony as both threats to the work of narration and necessary elements in the novel are inevitably tied to friendship as a philosophically incompatible notion with narrative representation. In this vein, Michel Foucault’s rapprochement of Bouvard, Pécuchet, and the biblical Job³⁵⁶ has a second, and pertinent, layer of meaning. The *Book of Job*’s remarkable narrative economy stumbles briefly when his friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar arrive to grieve with him. The implied familiarity of the reader with the performance of friendship lets the narrative hop over its representation – deeming it trivial or uninteresting, given the terse narration. Of this moment we are told they “sit on the ground for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to [Job], because they saw how great his suffering was.”³⁵⁷ Conversely – and here lies the problem –, it would seem that their friendship hinges precisely on the notion that they sit together doing nothing (that is, nothing relevant to the understanding of the story), and that this is not only unremarkable but a logical consequence of friendship.

The problem of *Bouvard* consists in its programmatic reluctance – even necessity – to embrace the kind of events *Job* (and the great majority of narrative texts) would wish to avoid. As Alexander Nehamas explains, it is hard to account for friendship in any other way, given that its dramatic enactments are often fated to remain strikingly unliterary:

friendship depends less on what friends actually do than on the motives out of which they do it – motives that emerge gradually through the ordinary, seemingly inconsequential

³⁵⁴ *Bouvard*, p. 290.

³⁵⁵ *Bouvard*, p. 262.

³⁵⁶ Michel Foucault. *Bibliothèque fantastique: à propos de La Tentation de saint Antoine de Gustave Flaubert*. La Lettre Volée, 1995, p. 29.

³⁵⁷ *Job* 2:11-13. *New International Version. BibleGateway* <biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job%202&version=NIV>.

interactions of which all friendships, from the most casual to the most intense, consist. (...) Ordinarily, friendship is manifested in the most, well, ordinary situations – situations that all but the friends themselves are likely to find almost always inconsequential and often irredeemably boring.³⁵⁸

Already in the beginning of the novel, the difficulty in explaining what was about to follow, how the reader should not expect to be able to find an explanation to the endless ledger which is unfolding before him, is signalled by Flaubert by an inconspicuous rhetorical question:

Ainsi leur rencontre avait eu l'importance d'une aventure. Ils s'étaient, tout de suite, accrochés par des fibres secrètes. D'ailleurs, comment expliquer les sympathies? *Pourquoi* telle particularité, telle imperfection, indifférente ou odieuse dans celui-ci, enchante-t-elle dans celui-là?³⁵⁹

Explaining the *why* is precisely what Flaubert will not do during the course of the text, even if the question is meant to hover over it. Like Montaigne – who, of his friendship with La Boétie declared that “si on me presse de dire pourquoy je l'aymoys, je sens que cela ne peut exprimer, qu'en respondant: par ce que c'estoit luy, par ce que c'estoit moy”³⁶⁰ –, Flaubert shies away from *le mot juste* of *amitié*, letting it unfold in undramatic fashion without offering any explanation. It is him, it is me; here is Bouvard, and here is Pécuchet. *Bouvard*, then, accurately represents friendship, if only because “only friends (...) could have tolerated, much less remained fond of, each other through these successive disasters.”³⁶¹

Additionally, there is a sense by which the representational dilemma which renders friendship anti-novelistic turns it also anti-critical, or shielded from outside critique, since there is never a “morceau” that can serve as proof of the thesis. Whatever it is that Bouvard and Pécuchet do together, it cannot constitute a proof or image of friendship but simply, as Flaubert adverted, a proof

³⁵⁸ Alexander Nehamas. *On Friendship*. New York: Basic Books, 2016, pp. 70, 87.

³⁵⁹ *Bouvard*, p. 204. My emphasis.

³⁶⁰ Montaigne. *Les Essais*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2007, p. 195.

³⁶¹ Alexander Nehamas. *Op. cit.*, p. 92.

or image of *their* particular friendship. For example: we can say that Bouvard's willingness to join his friend in suicide ("l'esprit d'imitation emporta Bouvard")³⁶² proves their bond; however, it is hardly conceivable that we judge our (or all) friendships in the same light.³⁶³ For it is intrinsically non-universalisable – perhaps why *Bouvard* has remained so elusive to critics. In one example we read that:

The desire for mastery, which underlies the construction of disciplines, falters consistently in this novel; it is replaced at the end of the text not by an entropic decay of vitality, as many have argued, but by an oddly mobile desire without a specific object.³⁶⁴

In understanding friendship as the "sole cause" and satisfying end of the work (that Bouvard and Pécuchet remain friends is the only certainty) we can reevaluate this "oddly mobile desire," conceptualising what we are left with "at the end of the text" as not so different from the root of the apparent faltering: a *specific* desire whose clarity eludes proper narrative representation.

Of this faltering, however, we cannot say that it is present in the nature of Bouvard and Pécuchet's friendship – their spirits remain high throughout, despite all disasters. It is the *novel* which falters and fails the task of representation, not in its contents but in its compositional dimensions. Were Flaubert's indecisions on the matter of genre a sign of the search for a mode of writing which would not falter in the face of the positive representation of *something*? If we agree that Flaubert would have sympathised with the idea that it is decidedly impossible "for a novel to give a *satisfying* representation of friendship that is also interesting"³⁶⁵ – as he seems to take the unsatisfaction of the reader as a necessary, however unfortunate, outcome –, it is possible to presume that novelistic satisfaction was cast out in the name of an anti-novelistic possibility of representing the gestures of friendship. After all, nothing else except for friendship is left in such a

³⁶² *Bouvard*, p. 276.

³⁶³ The willingness to die for the friend, instead, is so extreme to be construed in criticism as something else entirely, such as romantic love. Were Achilles and Patroclus friends, or lovers?

³⁶⁴ Nathaniel Wing. *Op. cit.*, p. 48.

³⁶⁵ Alexander Nehamas. *Op. cit.*, p. 92.

positive fashion. Friendship, observes Polizzoti, “is the emotional anchor that keeps Bouvard and Pécuchet from being mere satire, and the kernel around which the novel’s moments of genuine pathos crystallize.”³⁶⁶

Once again, and in other words, no other theme of the work is constituted as affirmation. The novel’s critique of scientific positivism is in harmony with the feeling of narrative disjointedness and cynical negation, similarly subverting structure and thematic object of criticism in one gesture. Guy de Maupassant’s 1881 review inaugurated the praise of *Bouvard’s* negative theme on such terms:

“(…) un formidable amoncellement de savoir, et surtout, une prodigieuse critique de tous les systèmes scientifiques opposés les uns aux autres, se détruisant les uns les autres par les éternelles contradictions des auteurs, les contradictions des faits, les contradictions des lois reconnues, indiscutées. (...) La vérité d’aujourd’hui devient erreur demain, tout est incertain, variable et contient en des proportions inconnues des quantités de vrai comme de faux. À moins qu’il n’y ait ni vrai ni faux.”³⁶⁷

And, in an article titled “On ne se souvient pas de Flaubert,” what Tiphaine Samoyaut dubs the “ligne Bouvard et Pécuchet” in contemporary French literature is merely the lineage of stupidity, farce, and disbelief in scientific positivism and absolute knowledge.³⁶⁸ Yet, a faithful commitment to the mission that “if the events that express friendship in a novel are to serve their purpose, they must be represented, and received, as insignificant”³⁶⁹ proposes alternative readings. In the 1870s, Flaubert struggled with finding a form which would better suit his objectives, perhaps still convinced – as he wrote to Louise Colet in 1853 – that “dire proprement et simplement des choses vulgaires (...) est peut-être le comble de l’art, en tant que difficulté.”³⁷⁰ It should be no surprise that

³⁶⁶ Mark Polizzoti. *Op. cit.*

³⁶⁷ Guy de Maupassant *apud* Stéphanie Dord-Crouslé. *Op. cit.*, pp. 445-6.

³⁶⁸ Tiphaine Samoyaut. “On ne se souvient pas de Flaubert.” *Flaubert* 18 (2017). But also *Seinfeld*, as Polizzotti remarks, is another inheritor of *Bouvard’s* lineage.

³⁶⁹ Alexander Nehamas. *Op. cit.*, p. 90.

³⁷⁰ Letter to Louise Colet. 3 January 1853.

this unfinished work retains a certain protean quality: if read as a literary representation of friendship, *Bouvard* is a list of things which Bouvard and Pécuchet have done as friends. In its narrative form, it becomes unrecognisable, baffling, and negative. As a list, its affirmative sense begins to unfold. Instead of subversive, it is an innocuous statement as it gets to say that Bouvard and Pécuchet are friends. But Flaubert's anxiety concerned its literary representation, not its ethical validity, which, like the author of *Job*, he takes for granted.³⁷¹

Double-entry bookkeeping items are, as we have noted, interdependent much in the same way that the Aristotelian friendship of Bouvard and Pécuchet is written into structure; that of the friend as a doubled self,³⁷² a soul, writes Montaigne, “split between two bodies.”³⁷³ The mirroring of the friends is, as Butor implies, an illusion concealing one single individual. In the same way, according to Neefs and Culler, it is senseless to separate Bouvard from Pécuchet and attempt to characterise them by relying solely on the clues pertaining to one or the other. Not only because each trait is only identifiable in symmetrical relation to the friend, but also because Flaubert often erases all deictic clues, as in the discussion on Beauty. In yet other instances, the reader must simply accept that an utterance or thought pertains to both of them as if indeed they are a single mind or soul, accidentally split in two, speaking in unison:

Et ce mot qui liait son ami à son bonheur, Pécuchet l'avait trouvé tout simple. Car l'union de ces deux hommes était absolue et profonde. (...) Plus d'écritures! plus de chefs! plus même de terme à payer! Car ils posséderaient un domicile à eux! Et ils mangeraient les poules de leur basse-cour, les légumes de leur jardin, et dîneraient en gardant leurs sabots! – Nous ferons tout ce qui nous plaira! nous laisserons pousser notre barbe!³⁷⁴

³⁷¹ Although, of course, it is possible to ask whether Bouvard and Pécuchet's friendship is virtuous, or good, and whether that makes it true friendship. Should true friendship allow its practitioners to never become wiser, never learn anything, and merely confirm all of their provincial, ignorant, prejudiced suspicions? In this author's opinion, yes.

³⁷² Aristotle. *Op. cit.*, p. 299.

³⁷³ Montaigne. *Op. cit.*, p. 197.

³⁷⁴ *Bouvard*, p. 206.

Bouvard and Pécuchet exist *only* as the outcome of a literary application of the technique of double-entry bookkeeping, which ends up becoming a diagrammatical representation and visual metaphor of friendship. Just as the lists of double-entry bookkeeping do not reveal the full meaning of their structure unless brought together in coherent pairs, the existential thinness of Bouvard or Pécuchet as individuals is thus a necessary consequence of the commitment to bringing to the surface their existence as friends.

To mediate the “superabundance” of the Real is the function of all techniques.³⁷⁵ The technicity of double-entry bookkeeping allows Flaubert to mediate between the admittedly unsurmountable number of books and texts read for the purpose of writing the novel and the doubled character of its protagonists. The will to render the account of the self, to set “out the sphere of life – bios – graphically,”³⁷⁶ results, in *Bouvard*, in the list – a graphical, table-like structure of the system of double-entry bookkeeping. This has curious results on the nature of the work itself, particularly in relation to the *Dictionnaire*. Flaubert’s dilemmas of authorial presence could not have been avoided as they themselves are the result of an unwilling constitution of a third self weaved within the structure of the accumulation of trivial facts and quotes. This is why it is impossible to conceive that the *Dictionnaire* – with all of its facile generalisations – should have been written by the very same people whose attention to detail and specificity is always divisive and paralysing. Reading it, we learn things such as all Britons are “brave gens, mais entêtés,” all cats are traitors, all Germans are dreamers, and that summer is “toujours exceptionnel.”³⁷⁷ The silliness of the opinions does resonate with the tone of some of the episodes in *Bouvard*. However, the rule to which we have become accustomed, the dynamic which allows us to unfold the novel’s meaning, is that such opinions are liable to be held either by Bouvard *or* Pécuchet, but not by Bouvard *and* Pécuchet. The text is

³⁷⁵ Bernard Siegert. *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

³⁷⁶ Walter Benjamin. “Berlin Chronicle.” *Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 2 1931-1934*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999, p. 596.

³⁷⁷ *Le Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues*, pp. 304-8.

inseparable from the duality of its characters rather than the aridity of their elusive individuality, their, once again, “extreme existential thinness.” Consequently, it is Flaubert – not Bouvard and Pécuchet – who is the true author of the *Dictionnaire*. If there’s any truth to a gradual recognition on the part of Flaubert in Bouvard and Pécuchet – or vice-versa – it is in an initiative sense by which Flaubert, by writing *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, becomes himself the individual who would have been capable of writing the *Dictionnaire*, whose attribution to the two friends is, thus, a fraud.

Another salient contribution of the mode of the list to the problem of friendship lies in freeing its representation from the doctrine of causality and hierarchy. The problematic end of *Bouvard* is no problem at all when juxtaposed to a given philosophical understanding of the purpose (the end) of friendship itself and its role in the novel’s ending. The opening, on the one hand, is a gross caricature of the romanesque beginning, both in its theatricality (an empty stage, followed by a slow arrival of its two main actors from opposite sides) and the appeal to a nonsensical version of scientific causality: “*comme il faisait une chaleur de 33 degrés, la boulevard Bourdon se trouvait absolument désert.*”³⁷⁸ The choice of a number which, so close to the conclusion of *La Tentation De Saint Antoine*, cannot but verge on the supernatural, adds to the effect of strangeness. On the other hand, this false impetus (*comme*) is all but dissipated by the end of the work and its steady fragmentation; a pilgrimage towards the very limits of the intelligibility of reality and literature. Prose, mutating into notes and rough drafts, becomes as scarce as water in the desert; narration is replaced by tenseless verbs or verbless instructions: “Désolation de Marcel”, “Haras d’hommes”, “Copier comme autrefois.”³⁷⁹

In the end, the *Odyssey* of *Bouvard* is also inscribed in the circular time of the eternal return, a literary affiliation pointed out by Queneau. In interpreting the nature of this final decision, it is difficult to identify what they return to, or the precise meaning of “autrefois.” They will not return

³⁷⁸ *Bouvard*, p. 202. My emphasis.

³⁷⁹ *Bouvard*, pp. 300-1.

to the initial state of affairs, since this new copying project involves remaining together and the construction of a specially designed desk which would sit both clerks.³⁸⁰ Yet, at this point, what indications are there that this is truly their last project, and not one more in the seemingly never-ending, picaresque, string of friendship romps? Flaubert's terse notes are still closer to portraying the return to copying as tonally and structurally closer to the previous episodes rather than as a definite, natural, conclusion:

Confection du bureau à double pupitre. — (Ils s'adressent pour cela à un menuisier. Gorju, qui a entendu parler de leur intention, leur propose de le faire. — Rappeler le bahut.)

Achat de livres et d'utensiles, sandaraque, grattoirs, etc.³⁸¹

In any case, the ubiquitous “etc” of the list – unceremoniously placed at the end of the narrative – does away with any sense of causality conjured at the outset. The initial “comme” becomes “etc,” projecting both the list and the friends' lives into an *unknown* future, whose signalled unknowability serves also to assuage the problems of the superabundance of research material. As Flaubert had already cautioned the reader, the same issue affects the narrative representation of friendship as well as the latter's superabundance: explanations of “the grounds of our friendship (...) contain an implicit ‘And so on,’ an open end or ellipsis that reveals that the friendship is still alive.”³⁸²

Because gestures *must* remain trivial to be interpreted as concerning the characteristic activities of friends, one cannot say of *Bouvard* that its end is a real interruption; no significant moment is ascribable to a lost future which is already contained in “etc.” Conversely, this is – as for everything which already happened in the novel – what allows us to understand those same trivial episodes as already intrinsically meaningful. The final – and decisive – effect is that which so aptly characterises the list: the ontological flattening of its items, their de-hierarchisation. In *Bouvard*, the

³⁸⁰ Artist and designer Gareth Long has produced several proposals for what such a desk could look like. See Gareth Long. “Bouvard and Pécuchet's Invented Desk for Copying.” *Gareth Long*. <garethlong.net/bouvardAndPecuchet/bouvardAndPecuchet.html>.

³⁸¹ *Bouvard*, p. 301.

³⁸² Alexander Nehamas. *Op. cit.*, p. 135.

technique is in harmony with the stated intention: friendship requires the representation of trivial elements *as trivial*. The mode of the list allows for endless enumeration, all while preserving the absence of hierarchy which makes its items equally meaningful in relation to the rubric. In other words: the form of the list supplies the resistance to hierarchical meaning-making, flattening all its items into a maddening democracy. Its extension *ad infinitum* is appropriate given the thematic and philosophical need of friendship to be understood only in time,³⁸³ in its unfolding as pulsating ramifications through Bouvard and Pécuchet's whole being, in such a way as to configure that "structure of the soul" – an individuality which is grasped all at once and impossible to account for narratively, just as it is impossible to string together a causal chain of events that explains how two people have become friends.

If a text which would aim to explain this development and to assert it doctrinally is, perhaps, impossible to write, Bouvard and Pécuchet are better off in a hazy, indeterminate, atemporal life as hypothetical clerks, lest we imagine any credible incident which would put an end to their friendship. Anything that happens in *Bouvard* could happen at any point, as long as it respects the double-entry bookkeeping technique. What has happened so far in *Bouvard* could also happen after it is over, and what will happen next could just as well have happened before. "Rappeler le bahut" means that the future of the list is also its past. *Bouvard's* digressions, just like in the previous example, contain the possibility of that essayistic wandering which is also present in the list, by which any of its elements can follow any other – even against the frail narrative glue which superficially unites certain incidents.

In any case, what have Bouvard and Pécuchet been doing all this time, if not already copying and reproducing? They copy each other (either by imitation or contrast), parrot what they read in books they do not understand, reenact and perform gestures and rituals found therein; they pretend to be doctors, archaeologists, actors... Undoubtedly, a certain inability to progress – biographically

³⁸³ The perfect friendship is "naturally permanent," and requires "time and familiarity." See Aristotle. *Op. cit.*, p. 260-1.

or narratively – would make every attempt only a slightly modified version of the previous one, with very little meaningful distinction. In other words, their copying is always itself a repeated gesture. Yet, were we to accept that friendship is a contributor to one's own sense of selfhood, of individuality, is it not possible to say, then, that both Bouvard and Pécuchet and *Bouvard et Pécuchet* become more original by virtue of mechanical reproduction? The list is a generous category and thus comes in many forms. We might quote here Benjamin's "epistemo-critical prologue," which serendipitously addresses these bouvardian dynamics:

Treatises may be didactic in tone, but essentially they lack the conclusiveness of an instruction which could be asserted, like doctrine, by virtue of its own authority. The treatise dispenses also with the coercive proof of mathematics. In the canonic form of the treatise the only element of an intention (...) is the authoritative quotation. (...) Method is a digression. Representation as digression – such is the methodological nature of the treatise. The absence of an uninterrupted purposeful structure is its primary characteristic. Tirelessly the process of thinking makes new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object.³⁸⁴

The list which is *Bouvard*, its relation to the rubric "The Friendship of Bouvard and Pécuchet," does, like mosaics, preserve its majesty despite its fragmentation into capricious particles,³⁸⁵ because representation must be, in its case, digression. After all, friendship too is digressive.³⁸⁶ "Le seul récit que l'on puisse en faire," in *Bouvard*, "c'est celui de ses infinis recommencements."³⁸⁷

Despite the anxieties expressed by Flaubert, digression in *Bouvard* is a carefully managed method, all the more fragile because it answers to a rigorous list-making technique analogous to double-entry bookkeeping. Double-entry bookkeeping writes into being the credibility (verisimilitude) of Bouvard and Pécuchet's friendship, just as it had written into being the financial

³⁸⁴ Walter Benjamin. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. London: Verso, 1998, p. 28.

³⁸⁵ *Idem*.

³⁸⁶ Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*, Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste et son Maître*... Besides philosophical considerations, there is no shortage of narratives which, willing to follow and mainly portray the activities of friends, find themselves inevitably lulled to digression.

³⁸⁷ Pierre Campion. "Bouvard et Pécuchet, le roman impossible des savoirs." *Arts et Savoirs* 1 (2012), p. 10.

credibility of Venetian merchant companies. In both cases, listing supplants a narrative inability to go beyond mere casuistry.

We can then say that we have found a possible rubric for *Bouvard*, and even if its anxiety is not political (unlike the previous cases), it does nevertheless carry some dangers. Above all, it steers toward literary collapse, an intention manifesting itself as the inevitable production of the unreadable as a proposition of the unwritable. Endless, boundless, lawless, digression accedes to the call of superabundance, to the multiplication of the literarily insignificant, the nineteenth-century siege by the excessive non-literary paratextual (the encyclopaedia entry, the instruction manual, the index, the label) at the gates of the novel, upon which rested the uneasy window of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*; a natural precursor to the modernist avant-garde.³⁸⁸ The *Dictionnaire* might be this promised work, built only with recourse to recognisable quotations but which, paradoxically, could not in themselves constitute the “morceau” of which Flaubert wrote – the goal of these fragments was to silence, not to be quoted.

³⁸⁸ “El hombre que con Madame Bovary forjó la novela realista fue también el primero en romperla.” Jorge Luis Borges. “Vindicación de ‘Bouvard et Pécuchet’.” *Obras Completas 1923-1972*. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1974, p. 262.

I.3. Curious Sights and Heavy Crowns: Lists of Melancholy and Curiosity

Lord, I'm one
Lord, I'm two
Lord, I'm three
Lord, I'm four
Lord, I'm five hundred miles away from home
 — Hedy West

In the previous two sections, we looked at two techniques of list-making: inventory, and double-entry bookkeeping. Somewhere between the wide reach of the former and the concrete operational chain of the latter, we pass now to another fundamental technique of list-making: the itinerary. Closest to the technique of counting, perhaps, and differently to the other two, the itinerary is defined, at its simplest, by a strict order of its items, its technique being first and foremost concerned with the phenomenon of *ordered disposition*: getting from A to B. This would make the itinerary particularly incompatible with digression at first glance, at least in the sense that we have been approaching it so far. Yet, if there is any immediately noticeable aspect which characterises the two works we analyse in this chapter is precisely their digressiveness; neither Ishmael nor the Khan tire of proclaiming or complaining about it, respectively.

In *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Cities*, the notion of itinerary is particularly nuanced. The reliance on fictional (at times hidden) itineraries by the narrators is an important part of their literary strategies: the production of items in these two works is tied both to their nature as travelogues, as well as to the specific ways by which they reflect the operations of the itinerary. We will look at these two texts as travelogues reliant on the techniques of the itinerary list, whose fundamental question concerns the possibility of travel to relieve the affect of melancholy – the condition affecting Kublai Khan, Marco Polo, and Ishmael.

The subject is complex and, accordingly, this section is divided into a number of different subjects. We begin by taking a general look at the itinerary list, taking the genre of the travelogue as

underlining certain characteristics of the itinerary and asking what is its function in travelogues themselves. We will first analyse how travelling is articulated – at a fictional and compositional level – with the affect of melancholy; and how journey and itinerary arrive as answers to the affect of melancholy itself but also to the kind of lists used to represent it. We will then consider how the itinerary fails to address these issues, by analysing, in order, the failure of curiosity and digression as possible organising rubrics. Finally, taking a cue from the texts, we will look to an alternative structure which acts as a complication of the simple itinerary structure: the tree. We will then see how it is used to allow the list to become an unproblematic form pointing the way out of melancholy.

Itineraries and Travelogues: Preliminary Definitions

The itinerary, in its simplest formulation, is (like the inventory and financial double-lists) one of the oldest listing techniques. More than the other two, the itinerary is not only a register and preservation of past events or experiences but has also a clear prescriptive dimension, oriented towards the future and to future *use*.³⁸⁹ Looking at an old and simple example, such as one of the many biblical itineraries,³⁹⁰ we could summarise its two seemingly most important defining aspects: the itinerary 1) conforms to *linear order*, and 2) must be (geographically) *sound*.

If we consider other lists of places thematically associated with travel, it is easy to understand why the absence of any of these two characteristics might cause them to fail to register as itineraries. The items in the *Iliad*'s Catalogue of the Ships, for example, are ordered in such stark

³⁸⁹ Jack Goody. *Op. cit.*, p. 80.

³⁹⁰ "Here are the stages in the journey of the Israelites when they came out of Egypt by divisions under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. At the Lord's command Moses recorded the stages in their journey. This is their journey in stages: (...) They left Abironah and camped at Ezion Geber. They left Ezion Geber and camped at Kadesh, in the Desert of Zin. They left Kadesh and camped at Mount Hor, on the border of Edom. At the Lord's command Aaron the priest went up Mount Hor, where he dies on the first day of the fifth month on the fortieth year after the Israelites came out of Egypt. Aaron was a hundred and twenty-three years old when he dies on Mount Hor." *Numbers* 33.2-39. *New International Version*.

contrast with the natural and political geography of ancient Greece, that only by a generous stretch of the imagination we could term it an itinerary.³⁹¹ In the Old English poem *Widsith*, on the other hand, the unorganised list of places enumerated by the speaker is subsumed into the recurring “I have been with,” again clouding our understanding of the sequencing of a journey which, nevertheless, has taken place and is presented to us with the same kind of items we would find in an itinerary list.³⁹² Unlike these two borderline cases, the clear itinerary is tied both to explicit linear order and to a heightened consciousness of the necessities related to practical use, its soundness or, let us say now, its *usefulness*. A preliminary, tentative, definition of itinerary could thus be *a list of items which, if followed in the order presented, allow its user to depart from the first item and arrive at the last*.

In this sense, the rubric of the itinerary list must be associated with the underlying voyage which it translates; its meaning is both the final destination and the inalterable chaining of events which makes the user of the itinerary travel from point A to point B. For this reason, the itinerary would seem to be particularly resistant to the forms of digression which we have identified in the previous cases, or to anything which would disturb either the relation of the items to the rubric or its usefulness – the sense of usefulness, Bayard points out, is removed from the equation once digressions take over the text.³⁹³ Having established its simplest form, however, the itinerary does offer the possibility of nuance which elevates it above mere practicality. In *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Cities*, it is often the play within the basic structure – on the limit of what could be considered an itinerary – that not only organises the text but also furnishes some of its most meaningful reflections.

³⁹¹ We see this question raised in the academic project *Mapping the Catalogue of the Ships*, whose creators tellingly use the term itinerary only in tentative brackets. See Jenny Strauss Clay, Courtney Evans, Ben Jasnow. *Mapping the Catalogue of the Ships*. <ships.lib.virginia.edu/home>.

³⁹² “I have been with the Huns and with the glorious Goths, with the Swedes and with the Gears and with the South-Danes. I have been with the Windlass and with the Waernas and with the Wicingas.” Anonymous. “Widsith.” *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. London: Everyman’s Library, 1982, p. 338.

³⁹³ Pierre Bayard. *Op. cit.*, p. 26.

On the matter of usefulness, the basic form of the itinerary list, once it becomes the basis for further expansion, does invite carefully contained digressions. These often arrive in the form of asides, musings, commentaries, or even narrative elements – none of which is pertinent, strictly speaking, to the itinerary itself. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael often inserts his digressions precisely within the context of the linear itinerary, allowing the text to “glide,” like the Pequod, somewhere else, creating items within items, and, in this way, furnishing also the concrete literary material which makes up the novel:

When gliding across the Banshee isles we emerged at last upon the Great South Sea; (...)

There is, one knows not what sweet mystery about this sea, whose gently awful stirrings seem to speak of some hidden soul beneath...³⁹⁴

South-eastward from the Cape, off the distant Crozetts, a good cruising ground for Right Whalemen, a sail loomed ahead, the Gooney (Albatross) by name. As she slowly drew nigh, from my lofty perch at the fore-mas-head, I had a good view of that sight so remarkable to a tyro in the far ocean fisheries—a whaler at sea, and long absent from home...³⁹⁵

From a certain point of view, it is nothing but the regular centrifugal tendency of the catalogue at work, digressing, engendering new items within the list: again, as Brian Richardson put it, “individual entities [in the list] seem to call out, often irresistibly, for their narrativization”³⁹⁶ (we read narrativisation, in this context, as *elaboration*).

Of course, without digressing from the itinerary which comprises the backbone of *Moby-Dick*, the text itself – its plot, descriptions, reflections, etc. – would not exist, since it is grounded on the experiences received and recorded by Ishmael *during* the course of a fixed and clear itinerary. The itinerary as a ‘list of places’ becomes inseparable from the itinerary as a ‘list of things seen, felt, thought in those places,’ in the context of the travelogue novel. Yet, as places gradually take a

³⁹⁴ *Moby-Dick*, p. 525.

³⁹⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p. 535.

³⁹⁶ Brian Richardson. *Op. cit.*, p. 339.

backseat to the inclusion of other items and further digressions, clarifying the relation between these digressions and the rubric of the itinerary becomes increasingly urgent.

A partial answer to this question concerns the relationship articulated within the texts between the underlying itinerary and the elaborations which comprise the text itself. We can frame this dichotomy as referring to two distinct aspects of the literary text – technique and genre –, considering that, as Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenander (et al.) write, the “genre in which a story is narrated comes with its own set of norms and values as it represents reality in a certain way, building a specific type of world-construct.”³⁹⁷ This should include the (cultural) techniques which organise reality and provide the means for its symbolic representation. If the technique is that of the itinerary, let us term the genre of *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Cities* the travelogue, noting that the two aspects referred to above are in permanent dialogue.

Looking at Stephen Greenblatt’s description of what constitutes the travelogue, we find indeed that there is an interdependent relationship between the itinerary as a kind of concealed structural backbone and the digression as its visible counterpart. Terming this digressive episode the “representational technology” of the “anecdote,” he notes how the anecdote is the main constitutive element of the travelogue, which, he writes,

present[s] the world not in stately or harmonious order but as a succession of brief encounters, random experiences, isolated anecdotes of the unanticipated. (...) If anecdotes are the registers of the singularity of the contingent (...) they are at the same time recorded as representative anecdotes, that is, as significant in terms of a larger progress or pattern that is the proper subject of a history perennially deferred in the traveller’s relation of further anecdotes.³⁹⁸

Simultaneously oscillating between being representatives of larger progress or perennial deferral, the problem of the travelogue, its itinerary, and its anecdotes lies in the goal of being ‘useful.’ And

³⁹⁷ Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenander, Silvana Beerends-Pavlovic, Bas Van Der Berg, Gemma Coughlan. “A Brave New Internet: Hacking the narrative of Mark Zuckerberg’s 2021 Introduction of the Metaverse.” *Narrative Works*. [Forthcoming].

³⁹⁸ Stephen Greenblatt. *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, pp. 2-3.

yet, if we take Greenblatt's conception at face value, it becomes easy to encompass everything that belongs to the text of *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Cities* as intrinsically belonging to the itinerary as well, for anecdotes – however digressive – are the *de facto* constitutive parts of the literary travelogue. Furthermore, as Greenblatt also underlines, they are indeed in permanent relation to the rubric of teleology which subsumes the itinerary: even if all they do is to help us locate it as something “perennially deferred,” digressions help us nevertheless to draw a line around the empty space of the proper rubric and thus identifying it.

The second part of the answer concerning our preliminary definition of itinerary, relies precisely on the powerful imaginative impact of genre and reception: if the inclusion of new items within the items of the itinerary can simultaneously disturb the *soundness* of the simpler version of this technique (without relinquishing the itinerary but rather relying on it), can we say the same of order, its other main component? In this regard, *Moby-Dick* is a fairly innocuous case, perhaps owing to its essential parentage in those “up and down manly books of old-fashioned adventure, so full, too, of honest wonders”³⁹⁹ – closer in spirit to those upon which Melville had based the more lucrative part of his career. The Pequod's itinerary is geographically clear enough, to the point where multiple cartographical paratexts have become a common (and uncontroversial) supplement to the book. Not so with *Invisible Cities*.

Again, one of the many similarities between *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Cities* consists in the imagination of a real itinerary grounding their texts, however digressive and disjointed the latter might be. However, in *Invisible Cities*, the possibilities of our tracing of Marco Polo's itinerary are frustrated, naturally due to the fantastic character of the cities and their descriptions but above anything by the absence of effective links between them which would allow us to reconstruct the original order of traversal even if the cities were not fictional. Yet, the itinerary of *Invisible Cities* still lies in there somewhere: as part of genre conventions and operations, there is the thematic and

³⁹⁹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 227.

imaginative power of the character of Marco Polo, his claim to fame as the traveller of a real, traceable, historical itinerary. A real journey and a real (although not realistic) literary work precede and ground Calvino's text. Polo's appeal to personal experience ("Sticking to what I saw and experienced"⁴⁰⁰), while fictional, also contributes to this effect.

But there is a more important way by which the itinerary comes to the fore: the very concept of its *linearity*, which lets us consider its existence even when it is absent. The diagrammatic metaphor of the line is what gives meaning to the itinerary and its reliance on a *timeline*, allowing us to understand the fluctuating dependence of the passage of time and the traversal of space as grounds upon which to articulate order. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson elaborate, the role of the line as an intermediate metaphor allows us to make use of the concept of linearity itself even when the line is nowhere to be seen. "Via the moving observer metaphor," we read,

we naturally, automatically, and unconsciously think of times as being locations or regions in space. (...) Given such a conceptualization of time, we conceive of event as occurring at those time locations or in these regions of time. (...) [O]ur metaphorical conceptual systems naturally lead us to conceptualize durations of time as a container for extended events and instants of time as locations for instantaneous events.⁴⁰¹

In shifting the notion of order (how events are organised in the timeline) to a *metaphorical* spatio-temporal line, Lakoff and Johnson's proposal suggests that the itinerary as a literary representation of the narrator's travels does not itself require any such organisation – just as long as it preserves some of the traces which would suggest the possibility of our recovering of the line. The list of the itinerary, in other words, is not necessarily ordered, but 'merely' *a class of the list family which concerns itself with and addresses questions of order*.

And this is evident in the case of *Invisible Cities*. Calvino's text preserves and underlines those deictic markers of itinerancy by which it appeals to the "moving observer metaphor," doing so even

⁴⁰⁰ *Invisible Cities*, p. 59.

⁴⁰¹ George Lakoff, Mark Johnson. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenges to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 1999. eBook.

when they cannot be of any practical use: “from *there*,” says Polo without specifying where “there” is, “after six days and seven nights, you arrive at Zobeide.” Another example: “after a seven days’ march through woodland, the traveler directed towards Baucis cannot see the city and yet he has arrived.” Other cases, such as the city of Despina – which “displays one face to the traveler arriving overland and a different one to him who arrives by sea”⁴⁰² –, might derive their symbolism precisely from their articulation within a hypothetical itinerary structure, even if we are never explicitly given the itinerary upon which that order is predicated upon nor the tools to reconstruct it precisely. Tying these markers to the question of genre, these excerpts are informed and inspired by the original text of Marco Polo’s travels:

On leaving Ghiuju the traveller proceeds south-eastwards for four days, through a country full of cities, villages and amply stocked with the means of life. (...) At the end of the four days the traveller reaches the city of Chansan, which is very large and fine.⁴⁰³

To recapitulate, in examining up close the simplest definition of the itinerary list, we have come upon a number of important aspects concerning our approach in this analysis. First, the itinerary is a technique of list-making concerned with the production of ordered and use-oriented lists. This underlines, then, not only the importance of order but of linearity and teleology as well, to a certain extent. Secondly, the two works explore the nuances and limits of this definition, grounding their themes and concerns on the workings of itineraries in a myriad of ways, conceiving of their function as referring to a movement not only from one location to another but, crucially, from disease into cure.

It is to this transformation of the itinerary from the geographical to the therapeutic that we will turn our attention now, analysing another kind of list which is not connected to the register of travel

⁴⁰² *Invisible Cities*, pp. 39, 69, and 14.

⁴⁰³ Marco Polo. *The Travels of Marco Polo*. London: The Folio Society, 1968, pp. 194-5.

but to the reason which, in both texts, motivates travel in the first place: melancholy.⁴⁰⁴ Lists produced to represent melancholy are remarkably different from those of the itinerary. But it is in response to the presence of such lists as representations of the state of mind of the narrators at the beginning of the plot that both travel the itinerary arrive as possible solutions. For this reason, we must grant them some attention.

Saturnine Travellers: Melancholy as Motivation, as List

Approaching these two texts as travelogues, it is hard to ignore that they also share the key thematic motivation for travelling. Kublai Khan, Marco Polo, and Ishmael (and, to a degree, Ahab), are all afflicted by a similar malady which prompts them to find in travelling the hope for a cure. In this section, we give an account of this initial impetus in the two works, particularly where its relation to a mode of listing is concerned. After a short introduction, we look at what melancholy does to writing and literature, and what is its relation, in the novels, to the decision to travel.

In view of a workable definition of melancholy, Reinhard Kuhn's invaluable study of *ennui* furnishes a useful checklist, which we take as our own. Thus, melancholy is 1) "a state that affects both the soul and the body"; 2) "entirely independent of any external circumstances" and "of our will," that is, it cannot be assuaged by a mere change of scenery nor willed out of existence; and 3) "usually characterised by the phenomenon of estrangement" – a loss of meaning in the world, resulting in the trivialisation of human creative effort.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁴ Regarding "melancholy" and our use of the term here, we recognise that it is related to a broad and subtle terminology, with complex and specific histories and uses: *ennui*, depression, *acedia*, *spleen*, boredom, black bile, *blues*, etc. For our purposes, we will not concern ourselves with granular distinctions, but rather fold all such terms into "melancholy" – even if we might make use of a particular term in accordance with specific texts, such as Heidegger's "boredom" or Baudelaire's "*spleen*." It would not seem to be particularly productive to devote an excessive portion of the analysis to such differences, given that we are mainly concerned with those aspects which – superficially – characterise them as similar.

⁴⁰⁵ Reinhard Kuhn. *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, pp. 12-3.

Being a disease of the soul as well as the body, melancholy also does something to the literature produced under its sign or which seeks to address it in some way. Echoing Flaubert's concerns in the previous chapter, melancholy behaves much like boredom, in the way it "seems to mark the boundary of narrative possibility." "Boredom," writes Patricia Meyer Spacks, "often presents itself as a trivial emotion that can trivialise the world."⁴⁰⁶ Kuhn's description of *ennui*'s "phenomenon of estrangement" rings a similar bell, striking particularly resonant in the recourse to those terms which we have come to associate with the flattening effects of the list:

In the state of ennui the world is emptied of its significance. Everything is seen as if filtered through a screen; what is filtered out is lost and is precisely the element that gives meaning to existence. Music is no longer an aesthetic world of sound, but *a series of notes*. Instead of a painting, one sees only *a conglomeration of meaningless colors* on a canvas; a book becomes *a series of words, one strung after the other*.⁴⁰⁷

Kuhn's examples echo the disjointed effect which the list as a technique of counting can induce in literature, by which a sense of wholeness is fragmented and scattered among a multiplicity of (seemingly irreconcilable) items – an effect of frenetic and meaningless accumulation. "Profound boredom," Heidegger writes, would seem to behave similarly to other lists we have examined in this chapter, making "everything of equally great and equally little worth;"⁴⁰⁸ and whether everything is equally great or little scarcely matters to the gravity of the melancholic's disposition, for it is the simple fact of *sameness* which produces an arbitrariness of choice: even in utopias where every desire can be met (as in the Khan's palace), "people would," writes Schopenhauer, either "die of boredom or else hang themselves."⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁶ Patricia Meyer Spacks. *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995, pp. 69, 13.

⁴⁰⁷ Reinhard Kuhn. *Op. cit.*, pp. 12-3. My emphasis.

⁴⁰⁸ Martin Heidegger. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995, p. 137.

⁴⁰⁹ Schopenhauer *apud* Mark Kingwell. "Boredom and the Origin of Philosophy." *Boredom Studies Reader: Frameworks and Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 2017, p. 220.

It is easy to relate such descriptions to that sense of *flattening* which we have repeatedly attributed to the list, both in the sense of a de-hierarchisation of every item but also in the sense of a depression which evacuates them of meaning due to this lack of difference. To follow Gaspard Turin's words, we can fruitfully compare list and melancholy, particularly where the sense of an instability which does not concrete in anything crucial is concerned:

[L]a mélancolie ne peut sans doute pas se fixer sur un terme ou une définition particulière, elle est vague essentiellement (...) Si la mélancolie s'exprime par la liste, c'est parce que cette dernière présente toute chose sous le signe d'un changement perpétuel, d'un déport d'un terme à un autre. Tout comme la première fut, dans les temps plus anciens, la cause de grandes listes de symptômes, d'organes-sièges de la maladie, de remèdes, d'exemples dans la nature.⁴¹⁰

Finally, the connection between travel and melancholy as possible cure and disease in our two texts is far from an original proposal: melancholy is one of the oldest maladies whose symptomatology and diagnosis have survived in a recognisable way. Across its history, cures and explanations abound – with the more notable of the ‘ancients’ being Aristotle's⁴¹¹ – but none perhaps as unchangeable as the injunction to travel. In Antiquity – we read in Panofsky, Klibansky, and Saxl –, the notion of a “change of surroundings, a long journey” is popular as a “typical” cure against melancholy, on account of providing a “means of distraction.”⁴¹² This very same sensibility can be traced to the nineteenth century, in which, writes Jean Starobinski, the travel cure is still relevant, widespread, and grounded on the same ideas of distraction and novelty⁴¹³ – the anonymous author of *Diary of an Ennuyée* (1826), for instance, hopes that “continual motion, continual novelty, the absolute necessity for self-command may do something for me.”⁴¹⁴ Melville himself, following

⁴¹⁰ Gaspard Turin. *Op. cit.*, p. 226.

⁴¹¹ Aristotle. “Book XXX.” *Problems II Books XXII-XXXVIII, with an English translation by W S Hett, and Rhetorica ad Alexandrum, with an English translation by H Rackham*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957, pp. 154-81.

⁴¹² Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl. *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art*. Montreal and Kingston: Mc-Guill-Queen's University Press, 2019, p. 45.

⁴¹³ Jean Starobinski. *L'Encre de la mélancolie*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2012. eBook.

⁴¹⁴ Anonymous *apud* Patricia Meyer Spacks. *Op. cit.*, p. 185.

the disappointing publication of *Moby-Dick*, undertook a journey to Europe and the Holy Land, after a long period of mental and physical exhaustion, and at his doctor's and family's behest. His father-in-law Lemuel Shaw echoes the spirit of the times and the long history of melancholy and travel, writing that the writer "has been advised, strongly, to break off his labor for some time, take a voyage or a journey, & endeavour to recruit."⁴¹⁵

Five years before the author's own journey, *Moby-Dick*'s narrator displays similar motives. Ishmael's stated reason to "go to sea as a sailor" is tied from the beginning to his depressed state of mind (a suicidal depression, to paraphrase Richard Dean Smith⁴¹⁶). The novel, in turn, becomes "a description of the process of Ishmael's healing from melancholy,"⁴¹⁷ signalled right in the first paragraph:

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing in particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bridging up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.⁴¹⁸

The first paragraph of the novel, this first list – a litany of ideas commonly associated with melancholy –, seems indeed to succumb to that digressive impression of "words strung one after the other." It blurs all its items into an alliterative and repetitive non-time of "whenever," further

⁴¹⁵ Richard Dean Smith. *Melville's Complaint: Doctors and Medicine in the Art of Herman Melville*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1991, p. 165.

⁴¹⁶ *Idem*, p. 67.

⁴¹⁷ Frederico Bellini. "Driving Off the Spleen: *Moby-Dick* and Healing from Melancholy Reverie." *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* 19.2 (2017), p. 23.

⁴¹⁸ *Moby-Dick*, p. 3.

underscored by Ishmael's inability to say exactly when his malady started ("never mind how long *precisely*"). The suggestive link between this unorganised state of mind and a hopeful organisation of life by way of travel is thus immediately present.

Despite Melville's deep familiarity with texts such as Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*,⁴¹⁹ 'melancholy' itself is never named in this list, pointing, perhaps and as Bayard would say, to the Freudian dimensions of the digressive mode, which engenders language at the same time as it conceals.⁴²⁰ Whatever the case for the omission, there is a strong suggestion, already at the outset, that melancholy possesses a kind of amorphous quality, best addressed by "synonymy, repetition, and restatement": "[i]f the reader cannot decide on the true nature of Ishmael's malady," Smith observes, "neither can Ishmael. His indecision accounts for the imprecision of his language."⁴²¹ With the stage set this way, Ishmael begins also to sketch a concern for what is a consequence of both suffering from melancholy and writing about it: the proliferation of (in response to his own imprecision) *imprecise* language, a process which, Turin notes, seems to naturally engender endless, and yet diffuse, lists.

Ever the self-conscious writer, Ishmael often returns to this question, more poignantly perhaps in "The Whiteness of the Whale," the central chapter in which he tries (and fails) to account for the creature's terrifying colour as well as the nature of this terror. In his attempt to articulate "what the whale was for [him]," we must recall that the whale had also been presented in the very first chapter

⁴¹⁹ Melville owned two different editions of Burton's work: an abridged one, acquired by his father Allan Melvill, and purchased by Melville in 1847 (Allan had sold the book and Melville recovered it some years later) and a full version purchased in 1848. See Mary K. Bercaw Edwards. *Melville's Sources*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1987, p. 64; "Documentary Note on Melville's copy of *Melancholy* . . . Drawn Chiefly from the Celebrated Work Intituled, *Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy*." *Melville's Marginalia Online*. <melvillemarginalia.org/Note.aspx?id=121>.

⁴²⁰ Pierre Bayard. *Op. cit.*, p. 15. The term melancholy is nevertheless used many times throughout the novel, but never as a descriptor of its main characters. The closest Ishmael gets to describing himself as melancholy is when he notes that "nowadays, the whale-fishery furnishes an asylum for many romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men" – a very subtle admission. As for Ahab, the use of the term "monomania" is also interesting. As Andrew Delbanco notes, the term was only coined in 1823 by the French psychiatrist Jean Esquirol, with James C. Prichard noting in the 1833 *Cyclopedia of Practical Medicine* that the term had lately been employed as a replacement for "melancholia." Although Melville never uses the term melancholy to describe Ahab, one wonders if the omission was, given the adoption of fairly specific and new term, deliberate and careful as to suggest an unspoken connection. Andrew Delbanco. "Explanatory Notes." *Moby-Dick*, p. 643.

⁴²¹ Richard Dead Smith. *Loc cit.*

as the “chief among these motives”⁴²² for travelling, in addition to his malady. Significantly, a further and unspoken relation between the two is evinced by a similar struggle against linguistic impreciseness. The long list which comprises this chapter⁴²³ is interspersed with variations on the ineffability *topos* – an apology for the imprecise nature of his description:

To analyse it, would seem impossible. Can we, then, by the citation of some of those instances wherein this thing of whiteness (...) can we thus hope to light upon some chance clue to conduct us to the hidden cause we seek? (...) [I] shall be content to produce the desired impression by separate citation of items, practically or reliably known to me as a whaleman; and from these citations, I take it—the conclusion aimed at will naturally follow of itself.⁴²⁴

Such declarations take Kuhn’s description of the linguistic effects of melancholy as turning “a book” into “a series of words, one strung after another,” and disguise it as literary programme. The possibility is that if the whale is in some sense equatable to melancholy itself or a metaphor for it, can the language of melancholy serve to produce its literary account?

What then follows is a list of such citations couched in tentative language (“hope,” “I take it”). What is most striking about this description, however, more than its mirroring of the ‘word strung after the other,’ is the way Ishmael presents its flattening effect as contagious and capable of trivialising the world – another seeming similarity with melancholy:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth from the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence white is not so much a color as the visible absence of color (...) and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light,

⁴²² *Moby-Dick*, p. 7.

⁴²³ Again, Melville’s writing is here very likely influenced by his reading of Browne: this chapter can be read as a rewriting of Browne’s chapters on the colour black in *Pseudodoxia*. See Brian Foley. “Herman Melville and the Example of Sir Thomas Browne.” *Modern Philology* 81.3 (1984), p. 273.

⁴²⁴ *Moby-Dick*, pp. 209, 221.

for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge.⁴²⁵

The beauty of even the smallest things pales when touched by the contaminating natures of the whiteness of the whale and of melancholy – the two reasons he set out to travel. Although “these are all supposed to be illustrations of the central idea that whiteness is what terrifies,” Theo Davis observes, “the volume and the sheer invention of the imagery is out of all proportion to the point. Their number makes any single image seem unimportant, undeserving of any sustained attention, or singling-out by a reader.”⁴²⁶ The immense power of whiteness itself, of a “great principle of light” which engulfs all of cosmos is not, as one might suppose, good or divine in nature. Whiteness might simply be the absence of colour, of life, it is “heartless,” it annihilates, and, most importantly, it slowly contaminates the entirety of human existence draining it out of colour. Such impreciseness also has the further downside of never having a clear endpoint, threatening to render language repetitive and unclear, but extended in time indefinitely – “la longueur,” notes Schlanger, “risque de fatiguer, l’accumulation peut lasser jusqu’à l’ennui, *taedium*, jusqu’au dégoût, *fastidium*.”⁴²⁷ Whether referring to melancholy or the whale, elaboration (*amplificatio*) stops having the function of ennoblement, resulting instead in linguistic degradation.

Once set up as the two major inciting incidents and axis of *Moby-Dick*, the whale’s whiteness and melancholy’s particular contagious quality affect not only the language employed to refer to and define them but also the nature of some of the novel’s major topics and the language employed in it. Some of Ishmael’s other proposed solutions for melancholy are more political in nature and come later in the text, such as narcissistic contemplation (“The Mast Head”) or a kind of romantic, transcendental, universal brotherhood (“A Squeeze of the Hand”) rooted in the *topoi* of American Transcendentalism. All are eventually dismissed as equally fallible, with “Squeeze of the Hand” –

⁴²⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p. 212.

⁴²⁶ Theo Davis. “Melville’s Ornamentation: On Irrelevant Beauty.” *Melville and Aesthetics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 37-8.

⁴²⁷ Judith Schlanger. *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

in which he addresses his melancholy via a sort of whitmanian transcendentalist rhetoric – being due particular attention:

I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,—Oh! My dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill humour or envy!⁴²⁸

Ishmael's enthusiasm is, as always, matched only by the ambiguous and contradictory development of his thought, particularly where the idea of universal democracy meets the problem of contagion. Melville himself had written to Hawthorne, in mid-1851, that “it seems an inconsistency to assert unconditional democracy in all things, and yet confess a dislike to all mankind—in the mass. But not so.”⁴²⁹ And there is a similar permanent double-bind to Ishmael's worldview, contrasting the inevitably melancholic individual and the contentedly democratic one: despite the scene quoted above, “mankind in mass” always turns out to be, even in the hopeful democratic *ethos* of the narrator, “unnecessary duplicates,”⁴³⁰ and, conversely, the “abstracted man alone,” seated “among the moons of Saturn,” (i.e. melancholy) is “a wonder, a grandeur, and a woe”⁴³¹ – and Ishmael's spiritual deliverance, we note, arrives only after remaining a solitary survivor.

Returning to Schopenhauer's remark, if every desire can be met, none is desirable; if everyone is the same, anyone is dispensable – after the squeezing, in the blubber room where the whale's skin is further refined, it is then that the spade man may accidentally sever one of his toes (or his assistant's). Once again, to quote Davis, “what we are left with is a plethora of images, none

⁴²⁸ *Moby-Dick*, p. 456.

⁴²⁹ Herman Melville. “Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne 1? June 1851 Pittsfield.” Merrel R. Davis, William H. Gilman (eds.). *The Letters Of Herman Melville*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960, p. 127.

⁴³⁰ When stepping back and looking at *Moby-Dick*'s structure and composition, that very same inability to make choices and a tendency to fall into synonymity and repetition may condition the activity of the melancholy writer and his art. According to a critical tradition, *Moby-Dick* itself is filled with cases of “unnecessary” duplication of which Bulkington and Queequeg, and Bildad and Ahab are the two main examples. Harrison Hayford. “Unnecessary Duplicates: A Key to the Writing of *Moby-Dick*.” *New Perspectives on Melville*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1978, pp. 128-61.

⁴³¹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 508.

of which is in itself significant or deserving of extended contemplation,” while the centre of *Moby-Dick* appears always and only to “recede from our view.”⁴³² The “blank tinge” of melancholy threatens to spin out of control, producing endless, and yet dispensable, words strung after another.

Like *Moby-Dick*, *Invisible Cities* begins by sketching the causal relationship between the Khan’s melancholy and the decision, in this case, to make someone else travel and reap the benefits of travelling for him, as well as the relation between melancholy and the inability to communicate fruitfully. In splitting melancholy and travel into two distinct characters, their interdependent relationship only becomes clearer and more acute. Not only does the Khan suffer from the malady, but so does Polo, albeit in a slightly different way. For this reason, and unlike in Ishmael’s case, if Polo appears to travel *only* at the Khan’s behest (in order to rid the latter of his own melancholy) it becomes clear throughout the work that Polo travels also in order to assuage his own nostalgic ailment – a discovery which infuriates the monarch. Travel as a way to address two distinct melancholies and their respective needs becomes the centre of attention in the work, making clear where the two meet but also where they irrevocably separate.

The first lines of the text paint the picture of the Khan’s own “melancholy:”

In the lives of emperors there is a moment which follows pride in the boundless extension of the territories we have conquered, and the melancholy and relief of knowing we shall soon give up any thought of knowing and understanding them. There is a sense of emptiness that comes over us at evening, with the odor of the elephants after the rain and the sandalwood ashes growing cold in the braziers, a dizziness that makes rivers and mountains tremble on the fallow curves of the planisphere where they are portrayed, and rolls up, one after the other, the despatches announcing to us the collapse of the last enemy troops, from defeat to defeat⁴³³

Familiar motifs are easily recognisable: the un-definition of space, the refusal of the senses to apprehend the world, and, more importantly, the way the events in this very same world are reduced

⁴³² Theo Davis. *Loc. cit.*

⁴³³ *Invisible Cities*, p. 5.

to a dizzying “one after another,” echoing Kuhn’s “estrangement.” There is also a sense of a particular brand of kingly or courtly melancholy, as in La Rochefoucauld’s aphorism, “on s’ennuie presque toujours avec les gens avec qui il n’est pas permis de s’ennuyer.”⁴³⁴

Historical considerations on the actual persona of the fifth khagan of the Mongol Empire might lead us to somewhat romantically regard the monarch as suffering from what we would term depression. “From a modern perspective,” writes John Man, in one of such descriptions,

a psychologist might suggest that he, the world’s most powerful man, was fighting off any recognition that dreams must die, ambitions fade, the body age, and that the best he could hope for was an empire that endured within the borders he had set for it.⁴³⁵

Yet, one should approach the character of the Khan and his stated “melancholy” less from a perspective rooted in historico-medical investigations, than in terms of a literary and metaphorological lineage, which Kuhn terms “the dispossessed monarch.”⁴³⁶ Despite the veracity (or not) of Man’s account, what Calvino takes up is a rich and historied *topos*, describing elsewhere the Khan as “a melancholy ruler who realizes that his boundless power is of little worth because the world is rapidly going downhill.”⁴³⁷ What ails the Khan is that which affects, broadly, “the lives of emperors.” Like Eliot’s Fisher King (another dispossessed monarch), the Khan asks a world in turmoil the question which afflicts all melancholy kings: “shall I at least set my lands *in order*?”⁴³⁸ – a prompt from which the importance of the itinerary as an ordered list and response to melancholy would seem to naturally follow.

⁴³⁴ La Rochefoucauld. *Maximes*. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1998, p. 120.

⁴³⁵ John Man. *Kublai Khan*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2006. eBook.

⁴³⁶ Reinhard Kuhn. *Op. cit.*, pp. 101-27.

⁴³⁷ Italo Calvino. “Italo Calvino on ‘Invisible Cities’.” *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art* 8 (1983), p. 39.

⁴³⁸ T. S. Eliot. *The Wasteland and Other Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1999, p. 39.

Walter Benjamin analyses the trope of kingly melancholy as a form of “saturnine acedia⁴³⁹,” particularly where its dry and cold attributes (which characterise melancholy in classical and medieval humour theory) are connected with a sense of stoniness, dullness of the heart, slowness, inability to take action, or – when action is taken – of a superficial and anti-humanist unscrupulousness:

This world [of things] is constantly calling upon it; and every loyal vow or memory surrounds itself with the fragments of the world of things as its very own, not-too-demanding objects. Clumsily, indeed unjustifiably, loyalty expresses, in its own way, a truth for the sake of which it does, of course, betray the world for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them.⁴⁴⁰

Benjamin’s words are particularly pertinent when it comes to analysing the Khan’s condition. In this case, while the king himself is not free to travel, his ambassador is the way he devises of surrounding himself with such “fragments.”

But it is not only the Khan whose melancholy motivates travel: Marco Polo too endeavours “a journey through memory” in order to “slough off a burden of nostalgia.”⁴⁴¹ Polo’s travels are grounded on a melancholy project of recovery of memory, just as the Khan’s (that is, the ones he asks for Polo to do) are on the memorialisation of the empire through its objects. The real world, betrayed in *lieu* of an imagined simulation shared between the Khan and the Venetian merchant, is dreamed of on the steps of the palace or in hammocks hung in the garden, as they gaze inwards in order to redeem, respectively, the Mongol Empire, Venice, or their possible memorialisation.

⁴³⁹ *Acedia* was the amalgam of a number of concepts – *siccitas*, *tristitia*, *desidia*, *pigritia*, etc – which the Christian revolution of the philosophical concepts of time and psychology had moralised into sin, “a condition of the soul characterised by torpor, dryness, and indifference culminating in a disgust concerning anything to do with the spiritual.” Reinhard Kuhn. *Op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁴⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin. *Op. cit.*, pp. 156-7.

⁴⁴¹ *Invisible Cities*, p. 88.

Insisting, once again, on the familiar motifs of melancholy, we can easily identify how the arrival of Marco Polo opens, above all, the opportunity to shatter an endless procession of monotony and sameness in the emperor's life:

Sent off to inspect the remote provinces, the Great Khan's envoys and tax-collectors duly return to Kai-ping-fu and to the gardens of magnolias in whose shade Kublai Khan strolled, listening to their long reports. (...) from this opaque, dense stridor emerged the revenues received by the imperial treasury, the first and last names of officials dismissed and decapitated, the dimensions of the canals that the narrow rivers fed in times of drought. But when the young Venetian made his report, a different communication was established between him and the emperor.⁴⁴²

Once again, a short list means to convey the particular sense of irrelevance of the Khan's envoys. The repetitive and institutional tone of "revenues, (...) first and last names (...), the dimensions of the canals," only contrasts with the heavy content of the reports – "treasury," "dismissed and decapitated," "drought," and yet we get the unmistakable feeling that the kind of things which should startle and occupy a ruler's mind are dissolved by melancholy and fail to elicit an appropriate response.

Yet, the arrival of the Venetian merchant as well as its statute of "novelty" quickly turns to disappointment, as Polo's own condition merely prods him to turn his relations of the empire's cities into endless mutations of his own home and childhood. As the meetings continue, it becomes obvious that Polo does not bring the effect of difference and novelty that the emperor had hoped for; the song of the "bouffon favouri," as Baudelaire would write of the melancholy king, "ne distrait plus le front de ce cruel malade."⁴⁴³

In a fit of "euphoria," the Khan demands to know the truth: "why do your travel impressions stop at disappointing appearances (...)? Why do you linger over inessential melancholies?"⁴⁴⁴ And

⁴⁴² *Invisible Cities*, p. 18.

⁴⁴³ Charles Baudelaire. "LXXVII. — Spleen." *Les Fleurs du Mal et autres poèmes*. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1964, p. 95.

⁴⁴⁴ *Invisible Cities*, p. 51.

Polo is forced to admit that every single city he has described, each and every one of the “dead objects” rescued to be presented to the Khan, is a face of the endless polygon that is the receding image of Venice. His cities are interchangeable variations of a mirage of childhood nostalgia, which the Khan even believes at one point to be able to guess preemptively, effectively cutting Polo from the equation. With less-than-satisfying results, the boring statistical lists of the previous envoys are simply replaced with Polo’s long list of *inessential* (trivial) melancholies, which speaks less to the inefficacy of Polo’s mission itself, than to the Khan’s own misunderstanding of the flattening effect which melancholy has over the whole world.

This effect, as in *Moby-Dick*, extends to the ideas which the characters form about the possibility of communication, literature, and, inevitably, to the items which compose the list-structure of *Invisible Cities* itself. Similar to the general sense of impreciseness taking effect in the textual proliferation of *Moby-Dick*, *Invisible Cities* never discloses what actually takes place or what is essential or not, resulting in a kind of deliberate and explicit clouding and arbitrariness of the plot’s elements. The recurring use of the connector “or” in the following list, for example, only emphasises their redundant character:

Marco Polo imagined answering (*or* Kublai Khan imagined his answer) (...) At this point Kublai Khan imagined interrupting him, *or* Marco Polo imagined himself interrupted, with a question such as: “You advance always with your head turned back?” *or* “Is what you see always behind you?” *or* rather, “Does your journey take place only in the past?” (...) All this so that Marco Polo could explain *or* imagine explaining *or* be imagined explaining *or* succeed finally in explaining to himself.⁴⁴⁵

The sequence of seven instances of the term “or” heavily underlines the interchangeable nature of all possibilities of communication, since every question can be interpreted as something else, every instance of speech replaced with its imagination, every dialogue with monologue. As an illustration

⁴⁴⁵ *Invisible Cities*, p. 23.

of the kinds of conversations held by the pair, the reader is invited to take this “or” and place it between every single city which constitutes the text.

It is particularly illuminating to contrast this list with an example from Calvino’s own “Lightness” essay (prepared for the Charles Eliot Norton lectures but only published posthumously). At some point, Calvino turns to the first two stanzas of a sonnet by Guido Cavalcanti,⁴⁴⁶ from which he underlines how the use of the connector “and” “dissolve[s] the landscape into an atmosphere of suspended abstraction. (...) In Cavalcanti,” he continues, “the conjunction *e* (and) puts the snow on the same level as the other visions that precede and follow it.” At this point, the language employed by Calvino in his essay is well worth our attention. On the one hand, “Lightness” and *Invisible Cities* coincide almost *verbatim* in certain fragments. Defining melancholy as “sadness that has taken on lightness,” Calvino describes its effects as “cast[ing] doubt on the self, on the world, and on the whole network of relationships that are at stake.” Departing from Cavalcanti, he relates this melancholy of “weightless gravity” to the effect of presenting the “ultimate substance of the multiplicity of things,” of “putting everything on the same level,” perceived in this and other examples of lists he puts forth, in which “meaning is conveyed through a verbal texture that seems weightless, until the meaning itself takes on the same rarefied consistency.” “In Cavalcanti,” writes Calvino, “the weight of matter is dissolved because the materials of the human simulacrum can be many, all interchangeable.”⁴⁴⁷

“Lightness” is an apt account of what is taking place in Xanadu. The ultimately interchangeable nature of both the cities which Polo describes as well as the language used to do so, much to the Khan’s frustration, possess some of that contaminating nature akin to Ishmael’s whale,

⁴⁴⁶ The full sonnet in question: “Biltà di donna e di saccente core / e cavalieri armati che sien genti, / cantar d’augelli e ragionar d’amore, / adorni legni ’n mar forte correnti, / aire serena quand’apar l’albore / e bianca neve scender senza venti, / rivera d’aigua e prato d’ogni fiore, / oro, argent’o, azzuro ’n ornamenti: / ciò passa la beltate e la piagenza / de la mia donna e ’l su’ gentil coraggio, / sì ch’e’ rasembra vile, a chi ciò sguarda; / e tant’à più d’ogn’altra canoscenza, / quanto lo cielo della terra è maggio. / A ssimil di natura, ben non tarda.” Guido Cavalcanti. “Biltà di donna e di saccente core.” *Rime: A Cura de Letterio Cassata*. Roma: Donzelli, 1995, p. 10.

⁴⁴⁷ Italo Calvino. “Lightness.” *Six Memos for the Next Millennium: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1985-86*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 13-19.

and the flattening effect gradually “casts doubt” on self, world, and everything which composes it. The proliferation of possibilities even renders it impossible to distinguish Kublai Khan from Marco Polo, and indeed results in a “human simulacrum” acted out in Xanadu: perhaps they are “beggars nicknamed Kublai Khan and Marco Polo” dreaming of life in the palace, *or* perhaps it is the other way around, *or* the world outside is not real, *or* it depends on their dreaming, *or* nothing exists at all, and so on.⁴⁴⁸

On the other hand, and due to the similarities in language, it is tempting to ascribe a deeper significance to Calvino’s emphasis on the connector “or” and not “and.” We might say, for example, that “and” implies that very same interchangeability in a way as to not dispense with multiplicity, whereas “or” implies a game of substitutions, in which weightlessness verges on irrelevancy. In any case, we might be better off by heeding Calvino’s own advice on the ‘proper’ mode of weightless flight, which by emphasising an aversion to dreaming, firmly establishes the difference between the melancholies of “Lightness” and *Invisible Cities* – despite the language:

Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don’t mean escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification. The images of lightness that I seek should not fade away like dreams dissolved by the realities of present and future ⁴⁴⁹

Not coincidentally, dreams figure heavily in *Invisible Cities*, notably when the Khan asks Polo to confirm the real existence of oneiric cities, and Polo warns him that dreams are never solely “composed by [the] mind or by chance,” but conceal hidden fears and desires which must be properly addressed.⁴⁵⁰ In other words, it is not melancholy itself, nor the multiplicity of things, and not even dreaming, which are at the root of the problem – “escaping into dreams” is.

⁴⁴⁸ *Invisible Cities*, p. 94.

⁴⁴⁹ *Idem*, p. 7.

⁴⁵⁰ *Invisible Cities*, pp. 37-8.

The Khan's hope for curing melancholy is, in the end, as "irrational" as it is misguided because he sees a possibility of displacing it through the same sense of asemia and mutual incomprehension that the communication with his envoys and tax collectors had relied upon. Polo is a "mute informant," and the two often eschew any communication at all, instead "pondering in silence (...), their eyes half-closed,"⁴⁵¹ betraying, as Benjamin would put it, the very objects which they seek to contemplate. The verbal exchange of ideas, and thus the very possibility of literary production – which, in the case of *Invisible Cities*, is directly tied to Polo's ability to report –, is replaced by a dreamy arena of endless possibilities that, like the smoke coming out of their "long amber pipes," only dissolves in the air, nothing remaining beside the endless proliferation of melancholy lists.

The Curious, Their Curios, and The (mis)Prescription of Travelling

Melancholy and its lists constitute the state of affairs at the opening of the two works. Travel comes to the rescue in both cases: it arrives as a disruption to the state of melancholy but also as a new context from which its flattening lists are given a chance to turn into something else. In *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Cities*, the very possibility of imagining a literature which evades the issues described above is projected onto the solution of travel and its own distinct form of the list: the itinerary. To consider why the melancholic should travel, we approach the question from two sides: firstly, by examining what is the reason given within the texts, by the characters, to embark on this journey and, secondly, by transposing the question to the realm of literary technique and lists; in what ways do the lists of itineraries produced in the course of travel address the lists of melancholy?

The first question allows us to further refine the argument on the relation between melancholy and travel above. Nineteenth-century French psychiatrist Louis-Florentin Calmeil elaborates on this

⁴⁵¹ *Invisible Cities*, p. 23.

matter, adding an important nuance to our discussion: it is not so much that travel is therapeutic in itself, but that it enables a certain disposition which combats melancholy. This disposition is *curiosity*:

Les voyages peuvent être conseillés aux mélancoliques dociles qui ont le privilège de la fortune, surtout s'ils possèdent un certain degré d'instruction, le goût de l'étude, des arts ou des lettres. Les voyages ont l'avantage d'exciter la curiosité ou la surprise des mélancoliques, de faire passer rapidement sous leurs yeux une grande variété d'objets, de séduire leur imagination par la beauté des sites, de la surprendre par la beauté de la nature ou par la perfection des monuments ou des chefs-d'œuvre qu'ils ne connaissaient jusqu'à là que de nom.⁴⁵²

Both *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Cities* give opening page (or chapter) privilege not only to melancholy but also to curiosity. Ishmael underlines it as the “chief motive” for embarking on the journey, and of Kublai Khan we are told that he listens “to the young Venetian with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other messenger or explorer of his.”⁴⁵³

The two affects, at first glance, seem to be on completely opposite sides of the spectrum. If, as Heidegger would say, what distinguishes something as curious is that “it falls outside of every determinate, individual sphere of the familiar and the known,”⁴⁵⁴ *ennui*, Baudelaire would rejoin, might very well be the fruit of “morne incuriosité.”⁴⁵⁵ Perhaps melancholy acts in opposition to curiosity, turning what should have been exciting and *curious* into a grey and unremarkable poor version of itself; or, perhaps, curiosity appears as a natural remedy, as it seems to be the case in the texts, by injecting a sense of interesting otherness into the trivialising melancholy worldview. As the shared etymology between *cure* and *curiosity* evinces, they ultimately concern devoted *care* (in Latin, *cura*) for one singled-out thing.

⁴⁵² Louis-Florentin Calmeil *apud* Jean Starobinski. *Op. cit.*

⁴⁵³ *Invisible Cities*, p. 5.

⁴⁵⁴ Martin Heidegger. *Basic Questions of Philosophy: Selected Problems of Logic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 141.

⁴⁵⁵ Charles Baudelaire. “LXXVI. — Spleen.” *Op. cit.*, p. 95.

Once the connection with melancholy and its deliverance is articulated, curiosity casts itself in the mould of “anticipatory curiosity”⁴⁵⁶ – a disposition necessarily inscribed within the flow of time and of chronologically and causally ordered events, from unknown to known, and, in this case, from disease to cure. A prescient thinker on the subject, Samuel Johnson had already noted how the ways to assuage boredom seem to inevitably lead to a process of temporalisation of its experience. Once bored, he writes, “we are forced to have recourse to every moment of the past and future for supplemental satisfactions, and relieve the vacuities of our being, by recollection of former passages, or *anticipation* of events to come.”⁴⁵⁷

For these reasons, Frederico Bellini suggests that therapy or recovery often benefit from the clear diagrammatic logic of the itinerary: “one reason why travelling was considered the best cure for melancholy was that healing from it is, like a journey, a gradual process.”⁴⁵⁸ One understands the more popular instances of this structure in some therapeutic concepts such as “the five stages of grief” or the “twelve-step method” of addiction programs, all of which serve to reenact recovery along the itinerary list: it can serve as the structure upon which the organisation of such events can be easily clarified. The “here → there” general rubric of the itinerary can be recontextualised to serve the needs of either curiosity or recovery as itineraries, into “unknown → known” and “disease → cure,” respectively.

Thus, the itinerary replaces the rubric of the list of melancholy with curiosity in order to provide it with a structure of order, linearity, and teleology from which an imagination of the possibility of cure can benefit. The itinerary list is not only a way to articulate step-by-step therapy, but a technique used to hierarchise and, more importantly, *represent* the gradating and linear here-there of *both* curiosity and cure. In this regard, we agree with Turin’s observation on the melancholy

⁴⁵⁶ Hans Blumenberg. *Op. cit.*, p. 445.

⁴⁵⁷ Samuel Johnson. “No. 41. The Advantages of Memory.” 7 August 1750. *Samuel Johnson’s Essays*. <johnsonessays.com/the-rambler/the-advantages-memory/> Web.

⁴⁵⁸ Frederico Bellini. *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

of lists, according to which it is in the “réappropriation de l’objet perdu comme fétiche (...), que le mélancolique retrouve potentiellement l’état d’hybris.”⁴⁵⁹ We would, however, phrase it as being that by the postulation of a false lost object which is deemed “recoverable,” the narrators of our two texts seek to find a way out of melancholy. This process relies on the fetishisation of this object as itself the object of a curious disposition (the whale, the empire).

Rubric	Melancholy → Curiosity
Technique	Unordered → Ordered
Operation	Dehierarchisation, triviality → Linearity and teleology

At the same time there is another sense by which travel and curiosity are twined, superficially closer to Calmeil’s account but operationally very distinct from anticipatory curiosity, if we depart from the very notion of the plural “curiosities” – or *curios* – which arise out of and motivate the journey of the curious. Far from being easily inscribed in a linear system, such *curios* lend themselves to be behind the impulse to digress from the strict course of the journey itself: as Chloe Chard remarks on the subject of travel narratives, “digressions promise opportunities for the indulgence of curiosity.”⁴⁶⁰ Blumenberg writes on this mode of curiosity as being pre-modern or naive, describing it as being unconcerned with “the direction that belongs to the motion that it thus stimulated, sensitive to the question of where it is headed (...) a base instinct that bound man’s attention to inessential and superficial matters, to prodigies, monstrosities—in fact, to *curiosa*.”⁴⁶¹

It is important, then, to understand curiosity as operating within these travel and recovery narratives at two distinct levels, each of which is related to different listing techniques. In its singular form, “curiosity” can easily become the rubric of the itinerary list. *Curios*, on the other hand, can seemingly only be related to the rubric of a hidden inventory list concealed within the

⁴⁵⁹ Gaspard Turin. *Op. cit.*, p. 230.

⁴⁶⁰ Chloe Chard. *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour: Travel Writing and Imaginative Geography 1600-1830*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999, p. 31.

⁴⁶¹ Hans Blumenberg. *Op. cit.*, pp. 235-7.

itinerary structure, produced not by linear order and teleology, but digression from the itinerary list itself. One should note that, in line with Greenblatt's account of the anecdotal accumulation which constitutes the travelogue, the production of literary *curios* still relies on what Blumenberg terms the "temporalization of curiosity" – the inventory of *curios* depends on the itinerary of the curious (as it had depended on a similar imagination of movement for Browne or Shōnagon). In this second mode of curiosity, however, the rubric is not associated with a cure predicated on the recovery of a fetishised object of curiosity to which the itinerary furnishes a teleological key, but with digression for its own sake as the premise (and promise) for recovery. We will term these two distinct modes *anticipatory* and *digressive* curiosity.

As it is easily intuited, these two lists start out as antithetical proposals for how curiosity works. Again in the words of Blumenberg, the inscription of curiosity in time turns it into a project of "anticipation, not arrogation," and subordination to whatever is deemed non-trivial, which contradicts the pursuit of digression as a rubric in the lists of digressive curiosity.⁴⁶² What then becomes noteworthy in the texts is the exploration of the conflicts and tensions between these two modes, and, more importantly, whether they succeed or fail to address melancholy.

In "Loomings," and maintaining the enumerative style associated with his melancholy disposition, Ishmael echoes the kind of medical and popular wisdom surrounding melancholy and its cures by furnishing a list of various justifications for why he goes out to sea – only to cast them all aside. His list includes concern for his own morality ("it touches one's sense of honour"), financial security ("they make a point of paying me for my trouble"), health and fresh air ("the wholesome exercise and pure air"), or even metaphysical principles ("the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage").⁴⁶³ All these were routine advice to the melancholic from

⁴⁶² "The shorter our lives, and the less time there is at our disposal, the more time we really have; for the lack of time doubles our powers, makes us concentrate only on what is necessary and essential. (...) There is nothing over which man has greater disposition than he has over time.' The 'knowledge drive' is the energy of this disposition over time." Hans Blumenberg. *Op. cit.*, pp. 441-4. Blumenberg quotes and comments here on Ludwig Feuerbach's notion of "knowledge drive."

⁴⁶³ *Moby-Dick*, pp. 6-7.

eighteenth and nineteenth-century medicine and philosophy. In this regard, “Loomings” reads like a list of commonly misprescribed cures, and yet it culminates in the most enticing of all: “chief among these motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity.”⁴⁶⁴

The sudden appearance of an item which makes the list ‘culminate’ represents a sharp turn in Ishmael’s prose. The melancholy list in the first paragraph invited us to read the remainder of the chapter as if it possessed the same flat and amorphous quality, as if, in other words, each item was the same as every other, interchangeable. Such lists, however, do not *culminate*, or at least we do not expect them to. The appearance of a “chief motive” retrospectively turns the flat list into a kind of oratorical *amplificatio*, suggesting that morality, finance, physical health, and metaphysics were never part of a list in which order is irrelevant, but rather that they composed a chain of arguments which lead us to curiosity and the whale. In other words, already an itinerary, in which we might attempt to glimpse Ishmael’s character not as undefined and cloudy (as the first paragraph had suggested) but carrying already a well-structured ethical and philosophical system of priorities.

The whale constitutes for Ishmael, as it had been for Thomas Browne and other naturalists whose works inspire Melville, a vast, roaming, cabinet of curiosities, its pursuit the pursuit of curiosity itself. It serves well as the departure point for Calmeil’s advice of “faire passer rapidement sous leurs yeux une grande variété d’objets” – we would be pressed to find a better description for the long, list-like, procession of objects and ideas related to whales and whaling throughout the work, or, as Ishmael terms it, the “endless processions of the whale.”⁴⁶⁵ In other words, the whale’s mystery and complexity presents itself as an opportunity to fashion from its the tales which surround it, the techniques for hunting and dissecting it, the many little marvels produced from its skin, bones, teeth, etc., and, in this way, an opportunity to endlessly add to the list of digressive

⁴⁶⁴ *Moby-Dick*, p. 8.

⁴⁶⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p. 8.

curiosity. The argument at stake in “Loomings” is that an encounter with the objects of curiosity can elicit a respite from melancholy – but which curiosity? And does either of them actually succeed?

The “overwhelming idea” is also mingled with the kind of second-order experiences of colonial heroism rooted in these topoi of *curiosity* which exciting novels about sailors such as Melville’s promised to offer their readership.⁴⁶⁶ Immediately after the excerpt above, Ishmael declares:

Then the wild and distant seas where he rolled his island bulk; the undeliverable, nameless perils of the whale; these, with all the attending marvels of a thousand Patagonian sights and sounds, helped to sway me to my wish. With other men, perhaps, such things would not have been inducements; but as for me, I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote. I love to sail forbidden seas, and land of barbarous coasts.⁴⁶⁷

More endless processions and endless lists. Such remote marvels promise to quickly play before the eye a great variety of things, all while couched in the more familiar imagination of travel rather than in the complex abstract contemplation of the mystical whale. The idea of curiosity as cure for melancholy is thus articulated with the colonial imagination of the “Patagonian sights and sounds,” the encounter with the other as *curio* proposed as a possible cure.⁴⁶⁸ Defining himself against a mode the mode of anticipatory curiosity which places value only on the final item of the itinerary (“with other men” *versus* “as for me”) Ishmael prepares the reader for the production of two different, but inseparable, lists of curiosity grounded on the itinerary: the inventory of marvels, of

⁴⁶⁶ “In the excitement today over Melville’s premodern themes,” cautions David S. Reynolds, “it is sometimes forgotten that he was a profession adventure novelist who tried hard to please American sensation lovers.” David S. Reynolds. *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 276.

⁴⁶⁷ *Moby-Dick*, p. 8.

⁴⁶⁸ A commonplace of the melancholy imagination of travel narratives, as Claude Lévi-Strauss notes: “Je comprends alors la passion, la folie, la duperie des récits de voyage. Ils apportent l’illusion de ce qui n’existe plus et qui devrait être encore, pour que nous échappions à l’accablante évidence que vingt mille ans d’histoire sont joués. (...) L’humanité s’installe dans la monoculture; elle s’apprête à produire la civilisation en masse, comme la betterave. Son ordinaire ne comportera plus que ce plat.” in Claude Lévi-Strauss. *Tristes Tropiques*. Paris: Librairie Plon, 1955, pp. 38-9.

curios, on the one hand, and the itinerary organised around the rubric of curiosity along which they will be emplotted.

These two different modes of list-making associated with anticipatory or digressive curiosity are in *Moby-Dick* associated to its two main characters, Ahab and Ishmael, respectively. For Ahab, the itinerary casts itself as a list in the anticipatory mode whose items the captain emplots into a tale of personal vengeance – if Ishmael grounds his narrative on melancholy and its cure, we should note that Ahab too directs the Pequod according to a desire to address a physical and psychological trauma. For Ishmael, however, the itinerary becomes a succession of invitations to digress, to expand in all directions into a larger list; the item as a mere container, devoid of any significance in itself except as an accumulative possibility. Andrew Delbanco's description of *Moby-Dick* as “a book that struggles to maintain its narrative drive against the impulse to digress and meditate and play” could be repurposed for the representation of the relationship and conflicting goals of its two main characters – it is both fit and meaningful that the captain is the one guiding the ship's journey, while the narrator can be said to merely take advantage of it.

Benefiting from and in contrast with Ahab's steering of the journey itself towards a defined end, Ishmael's choice of embarking on a voyage is not one of placing emphasis on a curious *there* capable of organising the world into the hierarchy of the itinerary, but rather a digressive, arbitrary, and de-hierarchised *anywhere*. When he remarks that for Ahab “the veriest *trifles* capriciously carry meaning” – after the captain's turned course prompted a sight which “in the course of his continual voyages [he] must often have noticed” –, it is also to denounce the teleological aspect of the curious mode of travelling, which overvalues the hierarchic difference of the *over-there* and leads back to the starting point having gained nothing:

Round the world! There is much in that sound to inspire proud feelings; but whereto does all that circumnavigation conduct? Only through numberless perils to the very point whence we started, where those that we left behind secure, were all the time before us.⁴⁶⁹

It is important to note that Ahab too recognises that all journeys require a modicum of “errantism,” of digression in trivialities, as he does when he considers the needs of his crew. However, in his recourse to the language of utility versus digression, he contrasts their base needs (in which criminal activity passes off as nutrition – an essential but “common appetite”) to his own extraordinary pursuit of the whale:

While for the love of it they give chase to Moby-Dick, they must also have food for their more common, daily appetites. For even the high lifted and chivalric Crusaders of old times were not content to traverse two thousand miles of land to fight for their holy sepulchre, without committing burglaries, picking pockets, and gaining other pious requisites along the way.⁴⁷⁰

His is a cynical view of digression, according to which the mundane is merely ancillary to the purposeful; the perception of his own journey is intolerant of any sideways glide. His quasi-religious obsession with charts, maps, and lines always redounds in the refusal of the digressive possibilities which cartography offers, but are meant solely for the pursuit of the “one supreme purpose.”⁴⁷¹

On the table side lay unrolled one of those charts of tides and currents which have previously been spoken of. His lantern swung from his tightly clenched hand. Though the body was erect, the head was thrown back so that the closed eyes were pointed towards the needle of the tell-tale that swung from a beam in the ceiling.⁴⁷²

In this remarkable series of images – erect body, needle, beam –, it is almost as if Ahab’s body too desired to teleologically stretch towards the end of the itinerary: “it almost seemed that while he

⁴⁶⁹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 258.

⁴⁷⁰ *Moby-Dick*, p. 231.

⁴⁷¹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 219.

⁴⁷² *Moby-Dick*, p. 256.

himself was marking out lines and courses on the wrinkled charts, some invisible pencil was also tracing lines and courses upon the deeply marked chart of his forehead.”⁴⁷³ The chart is for Ahab only a tool for the anticipatory (even predictive) mode of the itinerary, serving to register where the whale had been and thus where he would be fated to meet him in the future.

On the contrary, Ishmael not only recognises the natural propensity of travelogues and itineraries to digress but welcomes it, turning it into a program for literature itself. On the occasion of the meeting with another ship he criticises Ahab in terms, once again, framed within a debate of uselessness: “[Ahab] cares not to consort, even for five minutes, with any stranger captain, except he could contribute some of that information he so absorbingly sought.”⁴⁷⁴ Instead, he considers that “casually encountering” the other to be an ethical imperative, and locating himself in the item of the itinerary “the Cape of Good Hope,” he describes it “much like some noted four corners of a great highway, where you meet more travellers than in any other part.”⁴⁷⁵

From this short episode and musing, the narrator of *Moby-Dick* is keen to contextualise the notion of casual encounter within the novelistic work. The short lecture on the whaling term “gam” – which means precisely the casual encounter of two whaling ships – becomes an elegant demonstration of what it means to welcome the casual encounter in both whaling and literary terms:

But what is a *Gam*? You might wear out your index-finger running up and down the columns of dictionaries, and never find the word. Dr. Johnson never attained to that erudition; Noah Webster’s ark does not hold it. (...) Certainly it needs a definition, and should be incorporated into the Lexicon. With that view, let me learnedly define it.

GAM. Noun — A social meeting of two (or more) Whale ships (...) ⁴⁷⁶

This reflection on the correct way to go along itineraries (welcoming “gams,” unexpected digressive juxtapositions) is turned, in his hands, into a literary program of eclectic list-making. Similarly to

⁴⁷³ *Moby-Dick*, p. 215.

⁴⁷⁴ *Moby-Dick*, p. 260.

⁴⁷⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p. 263.

⁴⁷⁶ *Moby-Dick*, p. 263.

the novel and its polyphonic and liberal approach to genre, even the dictionary is shown to be amenable, like all lists, to playful manipulation and accumulation: “the spine of even the hugest of living things,” writes Ishmael of the whale, perhaps punning on the bookish meaning of the term, “tapers off at last into simple child’s play.”⁴⁷⁷ Thus, in “The Pequod meets the Rosebud” (another gam), a narrative episode taking place “when we were slowly sailing over a sleepy, vapory, midday sea,” the discovery of ambergris merely prompts another digressive chapter: “now this ambergris is a *very curious* substance, and so important as an article of commerce, that in 1791...”⁴⁷⁸

If Ishmael can easily recognise and argue against Ahab’s model of anticipatory curiosity, his own project also comes to be gradually recognised as insufficient (we will briefly refer here to the moments when curiosity fails, saving a more nuanced analysis for the section below). The most vivid example of the limitations of curiosity in *Moby-Dick* is Queequeg, and Ishmael’s account of his shifting relation to his friend as either a human being or human *curio*. Often, he becomes the object of a curious otherness, belonging to the realm of exotic marvels listed by Ishmael in “Loomings.” And he too appears in “The Counterpane” and in Ishmael’s eyes as he “observ[es] so curious a creature,” as a walking cabinet of curiosities filled with tattoos, strange objects, customs, foreign words, to the point where the narrator feels guilty of a “great rudeness” for staring and letting his “curiosity [get] the better of [his] breeding.”⁴⁷⁹ Queequeg is set up as the *de facto* cure for Ishmael’s childhood trauma (signalising his important role in the saving of the narrator in the final pages of the novel) when they sleep in the same bed, just as Ishmael begins to observe him so curiously. He is set up as the object of both anticipatory and digressive curiosity and yet Ishmael recognises in this mode of relation to his friend that something about curiosity might foreclose real human relationships as well as salvation.

⁴⁷⁷ *Moby-Dick*, p. 495

⁴⁷⁸ *Moby-Dick*, p. 447. My emphasis.

⁴⁷⁹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 30.

Queequeg's presence and his role as either curative or *curio* respects the novel's larger colonialist staging of the real and imagined differences between Western weakness versus native vigour, Western curiosity versus native cure, easily conforming, in this way, to the double meaning of the itinerary rubric described above. The question of the success of curiosity as cure for melancholy is further examined in the ensuing contrasts between Ishmael's prolonged and tortuous recovery from a spiritual ill, and "Queequeg's robust healthiness."⁴⁸⁰ This takes place, for example, when the narrator must correct himself after doubting the effectiveness of his comrade's fasting and prayers in "The Ramadan," or when, following Queequeg's recovery from a fever, he reflects on

this *noteworthy* difference between savage and civilized; that while a sick civilized man may be six months convalescing, generally speaking, a sick savage is almost half-well again in a day.⁴⁸¹

To the relative unhealthiness of the civilised world, the foreign as unusual, curious, and healthy, rejoins. But this mode of encounter with Queequeg does not bring any real benefit to Ishmael. Even though, within the mode of digressive curiosity, the vigour of the "savage" is curious enough to be deemed "noteworthy," that is, inscribed into the travelogue, its curative properties do not seem to rub off on the curious observer, and remains an ineffective *curio*.

The failure of the mode of curiosity becomes even clearer during yet another disappointing encounter with those human-objects of curiosity that, like Queequeg, are first regarded as *curios* and only afterwards as human beings: Ahab's stowaway crew. They too form part of those "unaccountable odds and ends of strange nations (...) queer castaway creatures," echoing Ishmael's desire, in "Loomings," for "things remote." Yet, the effect of the exotic barely lingers and Ishmael remarks that "what wonder remained soon waned away,"⁴⁸² marking the beginning of an

⁴⁸⁰ James Emmett Ryan. "Ishmael's Recovery: Injury, Illness, and Convalescence in Moby-Dick." *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* 8.1 (2006), p. 29.

⁴⁸¹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 524. My emphasis.

⁴⁸² *Moby-Dick*, pp. 251-2.

understanding that the limitations of curiosity might rely on the fact that it is only temporary – it would require truly “endless” processions.

A seeming exception is made for the “hair-turbaned Fedallah,” who remains “a muffled mystery to the last.” Fedallah’s description evades the language of either anticipatory or digressive curiosity, as he stands somewhere in the middle, neither curious nor familiar, seemingly saving some of the “wonder” which in other cases quickly faded away:

He was such a creature as civilized, domestic people in the temperate zone only see in their dreams, and that but dimly; but the like of whom now and then glide among the unchanging Asian communities, especially the Oriental isles to the east of the continent—those insulated, immemorial, unalterable countries, which even in these modern days still preserve much of the ghostly aboriginalness of earth’s primal generations, when the memory of the first man was a distinct recollection, and all men his descendants, unknowing whence he came, eyed each other as real phantoms⁴⁸³

Ishmael’s surprise constitutes the beginning of his transformation and the gradual abandonment of curiosity as a therapeutic mode. We will return to this question and to this excerpt in the section below. Some immediate observations, however, suggest that some of Fedallah’s mystery resides in his belonging to a place outside of time and, perhaps for this reason, outside of the temporality of curiosity itself. The employment of a similar language to describe him and the whale (more notably the adjective “phantom”) suggests that any meeting with the whale will too fail if it is approached with the dispositions of either anticipatory or digressive curiosity. In other words, Fedallah refuses being turned into a *curio*. What does that do to the main drive of the narrative of *Moby-Dick*? Again, we return to these questions below.

Turning to *Invisible Cities*, we find many of the same reflections on the relationship between melancholy, curiosity, and travel, with a few key noteworthy differences. As in *Moby-Dick*, the opening sketches a possible response to melancholy grounded on travel as a productive digression

⁴⁸³ *Moby-Dick*, p. 253.

from a sick life. Unlike in Melville's novel, however, and in response to his malady, the Khan (who cannot or will not leave Xanadu), invites Polo to digress for him and to engender thusly that curiosity of travellers which immobility bars him from experiencing first-hand. It is in the context of the Khan's curiosity that *Invisible Cities* introduces its own elaborate plot of *curio* production, whose descriptions, articulated by Calvino in the form of short lists, are even closer in spirit to Calmeil's account. We transcribe here an expanded version of the previous quote:

[T]he Emperor of the Tartars does continue listening to the young Venetian with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other messenger of his. Newly arrived and totally ignorant of the Levantine languages, Marco Polo could express himself only with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder and of horror, animal barkings or hootings, or with objects he took from his knapsack – ostrich plumes, pea-shooters, quartzes – which he arranged in front of him like chessmen. Returning from the missions on which Kublai sent him, the ingenious foreigner improvised pantomimes that the sovereign had to interpret: one city was depicted by the leap of a fish escaping the cormorant's beak to fall into a net; another city by a naked man running through fire unscorched; a third by a skull, its teeth green with mold, clenching a round, white pearl.⁴⁸⁴

Performing the same function as Greenblatt's anecdotes, the *curios* are here equated with the cities which constitute – at a larger level – the list of *Invisible Cities*, and the traversal of which was responsible for producing those very same objects. Because Polo travels at the Khan's behest to feed the monarch's own "curiosity," Calvino's double protagonist further reinforces the work of curiosity as pertaining to two distinct techniques of listing made inseparable.

To the Khan's own curiosity which prods Marco Polo to travel in order to produce *curios*, stands Polo himself as a traveller who combats his own personal melancholy and, consequently, his own fashioning of an itinerary towards personal cure. In his dialogues with the Khan, he describes a kind of extreme version of the itinerary structure, in which the linear and teleological qualities of this list are stretched well beyond the possibility of arrival. Eternal pursuit and infatuation with the

⁴⁸⁴ *Invisible Cities*, p. 18.

notion of remoteness collude towards an infatuation with the simple quality of *over-thereness*: what he seeks is “always something lying ahead.” Or, as he tells the Khan, “the traveller recognises the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and will never have.”⁴⁸⁵

In an important distinction from the binary system of Ahab-Ishmael – splitting evenly either anticipation and digression, curiosity and *curio* –, *Invisible Cities* clouds the separation of roles between the two characters: both Kublai Khan and Marco Polo can be said to ultimately reduce the itinerary to a technique dedicated towards the recovery of a lost, fetishised, object, the Empire and Venice. Yet, to none is bestowed the kind of curiosity as anticipation so plainly expressed by Ahab’s monomania. Instead, both characters seem to lose themselves in the accumulation of multiple *curios* which seem to mis-address their particular needs. The Khan’s expressed desire for cure is not located somewhere, or conceived as a logical development of an itinerary structure: he asks Polo, instead, whether the knowledge of all “emblems” – Polo’s translation of his journeys – will allow him to finally “possess [his] empire, at last?”⁴⁸⁶ In other words, he too dreams of a cure via the accumulation made possible by Polo’s digressive travels.

Similarly, the itinerary conceived by Polo is distorted: eschewing an arrival point, its rubric is not anymore the transition from the first item to the last or the anticipation of curiosity, but accumulation and movement for their own sake. The tendency towards infinity of the inventory list subsumed in the itinerary is dangerously transferred to the itinerary itself, which loses its potential virtues and becomes just another way to digress endlessly. If Ishmael ponders upon the inadequateness of either anticipatory or digressive curiosity, Marco Polo and the Khan are the emblem of what takes place when the two are taken up seemingly simultaneously, without reaping any of the benefits.

⁴⁸⁵ *Invisible Cities*, pp. 24-5.

⁴⁸⁶ *Invisible Cities*, p. 19.

The consequences of this lack of balance are evident throughout *Invisible Cities* – and not only by the suggestion that neither of its characters manages to overcome their melancholic condition. More significant is, on the one hand, the overwhelming presence of the list-structures resulting from digressive curiosities (Polo's objects, the cities themselves) and, on the other hand, the absence of any interest in the itinerary structure which should anchor this list. Besides Polo's quote's above, his distaste for itineraries is at times even more explicit, showing itself in a recurring criticism of cartography and itinerary structures.

The description of Eudoxia (the city in which a carpet-map slowly collapses into and engulfs the territory it is supposed to map), for example, brings to mind Borges' cautionary tale on the suspicion of cartographic endeavours.⁴⁸⁷ The inhabitants of Esmeralda seem to have spared the burden of "boredom" simply by banishing the strict itinerary from their daily lives:

Combining segments of the various routes, elevated or on the ground level, each inhabitant can enjoy every day the pleasure of a new itinerary to reach the same places. The most fixed and calm lives in Esmeralda are spent without any repetition.⁴⁸⁸

Yet, in the end, if this particular report should serve as a kind of parable for Polo's own disavowal of itinerant structures, the disavowal of repetition still reminds us of the capricious "continual motion, continual novelty" which stands for curiosity's fugitiveness, for travel as mis-prescription for melancholy – a certain sense of disquiet which Polo expresses in his own version of the infinite itinerary. The casual digressive quality which regiments the daily life of Esmeralda's inhabitants has its own shortcomings: one notes how the city-dwellers arrive always at "the same places" (even though they supposedly avoid repetition), or how their methods redound not in happiness, but in those same qualities of fixidity and calmness which Benjamin listed among those of kingly

⁴⁸⁷ Jorge Luis Borges. "Del Rigor en la Ciencia." *Obras Completas 1923-1972*. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1974, p. 847.

⁴⁸⁸ *Invisible Cities*, p. 79.

melancholy. There is a powerful suggestion that adopting digression in order to combat melancholy leads only to a deepening of that very same melancholy.

The inhabitants of Esmeralda are altogether blind to that which is truly capable of transcending cartography and itinerary, such as

the routes of the swallows, who cut the air over the roofs, dropping long invisible parabolas with their still wings, darting to gulp a mosquito, spiraling upward, grazing a pinnacle, dominating from every point of their airy paths all the points of the city.⁴⁸⁹

A radical refusal to consider any and all itineraries stops them from witnessing a model of life which can truly transcend it: “dominating from every point,” the swallow has the gift of ubiquity, which the curious in the itinerary, by definition, does not. Here the hidden critique is worded differently, relying on the opposition between a desire for simultaneity, for ubiquity, and the impossibility of any itinerary structure of providing that very same impression.

Another instance of Polo’s critique of the itinerary structure is found in the description of the city of Zora, this time aimed at its role in digressive, accumulative, curiosity:

Zora’s secret lies in the way your gaze runs over patterns following one another as in a musical score where not a note can be altered or displaced. (...) Between each idea and each point of the itinerary an affinity or a contrast can be established, serving as an immediate aid to memory. So the world’s most learned men are those who have memorized Zora.⁴⁹⁰

Zora is memorable because it is an itinerary, or rather, it is the itinerary which renders it – harkening to the techniques of artificial memory – memorialisable, even possessing, by virtue of this quality, the ability to address the specific kind of melancholy associated with insomnia: “the man who knows by heart how Zora is made, if he is unable to sleep at night, can imagine he is walking along the streets and he remembers.” In this remark, Polo alludes also to the itinerary list’s function of

⁴⁸⁹ *Invisible Cities*, p. 80.

⁴⁹⁰ *Invisible Cities*, p. 13.

producing *curios* as a string of mnemonic containers, since the things which the insomniac remembers resemble almost a touristic guidebook, or precisely those curious sights which the traveller hopes to see in the course of their travels and, again in Chard's words, "opportunities for the indulgence of curiosity": "the fountain with the nine jets, the astronomer's glass tower, the melon vendor's kiosk, the statue of the hermit and the lion, the Turkish bath," etc.

Thus, Zora is also more than mere itinerary, and the impression of inwards digression suggests it could potentially house the whole world:

This city which cannot be expunged from the mind is like an armature, a honeycomb in whose cells each of us can place the things he wants to remember: names of famous men, virtues, numbers, vegetable and mineral classifications, dates of battles, constellations, parts of speech.⁴⁹¹

In one sense, then, Zora is an image of the itinerary structure as providing the framework for the two modes of curiosity. On the one hand, the strict order of reading which renders it memorialisable, allows one gaze to effortlessly run from one item to another, even if none of them "possesses a special beauty or rarity." On the other hand, this strictness allows for the itinerary to serve as a mere departure point for an indulgence in digressive curiosity, inserting within its items whatever one wishes.

And yet, what results resembles nothing positive as incongruities accumulate. The fact that each of the "points" is not particularly beautiful or rare subverts their listing as promising *curios*, suggesting instead our reading of the lists of Zora as a series of either empty containers or trivial sights which, after all, could be anywhere at all. Its virtue lies solely on their fixedness, and the poverty of the objects themselves and their ensuing sense of interchangeability does little to disinvite melancholy from taking over once again. In other words, recalling the itinerary might serve as an incantation to fall asleep, but would not the dreams of Zora be correspondingly barren?

⁴⁹¹ *Invisible Cities*, p. 13.

Moreover, as Benjamin explains, simple memorialisation is a deadly proposition for the objects it contemplates; and so is, ultimately, Zora:

But in vain I set out to visit the city: forced to remain motionless and always the same, in order to be more easily remembered, Zora has languished, disintegrated, disappeared. The earth has forgotten her.⁴⁹²

The operations of the itinerary result, paradoxically, in fatal fixedness. The “dead objects” of Benjamin far too easily become those which the work of curiosity renders inert. Zora becomes a uniquely suited image both for ways by which itinerary and inventory, and anticipatory and digressive curiosity collaborate but also how they engender their mutual subversion.

Together, Esmeralda and Zora end up revealing the same problems as those which Benjamin had attributed to kingly melancholy, hence, to the nature of the Khan’s own malady: rigidity, fixedness. Regarding the mutually addressing failure of anticipatory and digressive curiosity to avoid the return of melancholy, Polo’s construction is at one point particularly suggestive:

At the moment when I concentrate and reflect, I find myself again, always, in this garden, at this hour of the evening, in your august presence, though I continue, without a moment’s pause, moving up a river green with crocodiles or counting the barrels of salted fish being lowered into the hold.⁴⁹³

Itineraries are followed, inventories are counted but, in the end, melancholy can only produce copies of itself, perpetually folding into a black centre.

The end result in both texts is similar. In response to the seemingly commonsensical proposal which prompts travelling as a response to melancholy, arrives a similarly sensible conclusion regarding the relationship between travel, melancholy, and curiosity: that travelling under the sign of curiosity in order to assuage melancholy may not only fail to produce meaningful results but even carry negative consequences. As the website of the *International Association for Medical*

⁴⁹² *Invisible Cities*, p. 13.

⁴⁹³ *Invisible Cities*, p. 93.

Assistance to Travellers warns: “although a trip may bring temporary relief to some depressive symptoms, it is not a cure.”⁴⁹⁴ Or in Heidegger’s lengthier formulation:

Who does not know that we have already set about suppressing [boredom] and are concerned to drive it away as soon as it approaches; that this does not always succeed, that indeed precisely when we set upon it with all the means at our disposal it becomes stubborn, obstinate; that it then really does persist and returns more frequently, slowly propelling us to the threshold of melancholy? Even when we succeed in shaking it off—do we not know at the same time it may well return?⁴⁹⁵

Circular and self-referential, curiosity, Heidegger adds, eludes us in believing we might be pursuing something when we are only pursuing “ourselves in a psychology motivated by curiosity.”⁴⁹⁶ Ishmael’s apologetic list of reasons to travel in “Loomings” conforms to this impression. Its items are briefly enunciated, considered, but ultimately cast aside in favour of the chief motive of curiosity. None achieves any explanatory stability since all justifications fail to describe any meaningful connection to the central problem that they were meant to solve. Instead, they appear to configure nothing more than a surreptitious desire for desires. The ancient cure for melancholy is, after all, as old as the recognition of its limitations: “*patriae quis exsul se quoque fugit?*” wrote Horace – “what expatriate has ever succeeded in escaping from himself as well?”⁴⁹⁷

What happens then is something we might term ‘melancholy’s betrayal’: the inevitable return of its digressive and trivialising aspects. If anticipatory curiosity could have delivered a distinct model, digressive curiosity merely allows for the total ontological flattening effect to take over once again. As Polo notes in *Invisible Cities*, it only contributes to a jamming “of past, present, future

⁴⁹⁴ “Travel and Depression.” *International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers*. <iamat.org/travel-and-depression>.

⁴⁹⁵ Martin Heidegger. *Op. cit.*, p. 79.

⁴⁹⁶ *Idem*, p. 77.

⁴⁹⁷ Horace. “Contentment the only true happiness” [II.16]. *Odes and Epodes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 129.

that blocks existences calcified in the illusion of movement,”⁴⁹⁸ or, in the words of Ishmael, a circumnavigation which runs nowhere.

The List as Tree, and the List-maker as its Woodworm

Given the successive failure of two itinerary models and two distinct rubrics in addressing melancholy’s own lists, the narrators of *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Cities* come upon the problem of needing to find a form which can simultaneously answer all the requirements of the complex interplay of lists of melancholy and curiosity described above – all while evading their respective pitfalls. A form that can, in short, allow for the techniques of the itinerary list’s item production while simultaneously accurately accounting for melancholy; between solidity and sublimation. The structure and metaphor chanced upon in both texts is the tree.

Jacques Bertin’s *Semiology of Graphics* provides us with a short definition of “tree network” which connects it to the technique of itineraries. A tree, Bertin writes, is “a network in which there is only one possible path to go from one point (node) to another.”⁴⁹⁹ In other words, a tree can be understood as being composed of a number of itineraries, combined into multiple routes and paths. Marco Polo and Ishmael recognise this intimate relation between the technique of the itinerary and the structure of the tree which supersedes it. In both texts, the arboreal metaphor recurs again and again as an image of their literary and discursive practices, perhaps evincing, as Bayard noted, the way digression seems to naturally engender arborescent structures.⁵⁰⁰

Accordingly, Polo’s discourse is “ramified and leafy,” capable, in this way, of bringing together what would otherwise be “isolated sounds” and “dry verbs;”⁵⁰¹ the inhabitants of Esmeralda (those

⁴⁹⁸ *Invisible Cities*, p. 89.

⁴⁹⁹ Jacques Bertin. *Semiology of Graphics: Diagrams, Networks, Maps*. Redlands: Esri Press, 2011, p. 276.

⁵⁰⁰ Pierre Bayard. *Op. cit.*, p. 19. Judith Schlanger makes a similar connection and remark, on the subject of the “roman-feuilleton.” See Judith Schlanger. *Trop Dire ou Trop Peu: La Densité Littéraire*. Paris: Éditions Hermann, 2016, p. 14.

⁵⁰¹ *Invisible Cities*, p. 32.

seemingly closer to evading melancholy) move in tortuous optional routes which “ramify.”⁵⁰² This ability to bring together isolated sounds into productive speech, or isolated inhabitants into a living community, is perhaps tied to Calvino’s own sensibility which, stated elsewhere, understands representations such as the “genealogical tree” as “stories condensed into images.”⁵⁰³ This articulation of linear multiplicity into a single perceptible and powerful meaning is, according to Sigrid Weigel, characteristic of the tree structure as a technique of representation: “between diachronic and synchronic,” representations of multiple itineraries in the form of trees can gesture to a “form of simultaneity.”⁵⁰⁴ Or, as Doreen Massey writes, “place as an ever-shifting constellation of trajectories poses the question of our throwntogetherness,” opening up the possibilities for fruitful juxtapositions and connections.⁵⁰⁵ If “stories” tend to be presented in a linear form, “images,” instead, might gesture towards an illusion of simultaneity which can transcend the itinerary itself without, however, fully relinquishing its operations. The desire to inhabit this seeming paradox is at the heart of Marco Polo and Ishmael’s projects.

The nature of Polo’s melancholy is thus expressed in this context, as an inability to transcend the strict itineraries which comprise the larger tree structure upon which he moves:

By now, from that real or hypothetical past of his, he is excluded; he cannot stop; he must go to another city, where another of his pasts awaits him, or something perhaps that had been a possible future of his and is now someone else’s present. Futures not achieved are only branches of the past: *dead branches*.⁵⁰⁶

This passage’s connection between this multiplicity of pasts and futures (which often characterises the conversations between Kublai and Polo) and the image of the dead tree imprints a sense of tragedy to the previous mention of Polo’s speech as “ramified and leafy.” It once again underlines

⁵⁰² *Invisible Cities*, p. 79.

⁵⁰³ Italo Calvino. “Plan for a Journal.” *The Written World and the Unwritten World: Collected Non-Fiction*. London: Penguin Books, 2023, p. 167.

⁵⁰⁴ Sigrid Weigel. “Genealogy: On the Iconography and Rhetorics of an Epistemological Topos.” *Enciclopédia e Hipertexto*. Lisboa: Edições Duarte Reis, 2006, p. 7.

⁵⁰⁵ Doreen Massey. *For Space*. London: Sage, 2006, pp. 151-2.

⁵⁰⁶ *Invisible Cities*, p. 24.

the difference between what Polo and the Khan dream together when listening to the reports of the ambassador's travels and the actual constraints of those very same travels – the anguish of loss, in other words, present in the itinerary.

Tree structures, in a practical sense, can be understood in two distinct ways: they can be read downwards or upwards. A tree that is read in the direction of its 'trunk', so to speak, is for example the genealogical tree in which all ancestors are shown to converge into a single person. Michael Marder calls each 'node' of this type of tree a "crippled link" and "vanishing mediator in the name of teleological closure," since their value is perceived only insofar as they constitute causal chains which result in the 'node' of the trunk.⁵⁰⁷ A second type of tree, however, can be achieved by simply reversing the proportion between descendants and ancestors – biological taxonomy is a good example of this category. Each node, in this case, acts not as the 'cause' of another, but as a container for multiple other nodes:⁵⁰⁸ the lion – like the dog, the human, the okapi – is contained in the node *mammal*; and mammals, together with reptiles and fish, are contained in node *vertebrate*; those, in turn, might be paired with other beings, and so on, until reaching the trunk of this tree, which is not the consequence of all other nodes, but their, so to speak, ultimate cause. We read such trees from trunk to branch. Thus the lion is *eukaryota*, *animalia*, *chordata*, *mammalia*, *carnivora*, *feliformia*, *felidae*, *pantherinae*, and, finally, *panthera leo*.

Polo's anguish can easily be related to this second type of tree, in which certain itineraries branch out and our choices within them make "dead branches" of all the roads not taken – indeed, it seems at first glance that Polo's situation is like in Robert Frost's poem, feeling "sorry [he] could not travel both."⁵⁰⁹ However, Polo's imagination does not limit itself to his possible futures, as the note that his past might be "real or hypothetical" shows: because each new point of the itinerary

⁵⁰⁷ Michael Marder. *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 4-5.

⁵⁰⁸ Only this second type of tree conforms to what Deleuze and Guattari described as the imposition of the verb "être:" the lion *is* a mammal, mammals *are* vertebrate, and so on. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari. *Mille Plateaux*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980, p. 36.

⁵⁰⁹ Robert Frost. "The Road Not Taken." *Complete Poems of Robert Frost*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964, p. 131.

constitutes also a refashioning of the ultimate origin of his travels (the Venice of his childhood), we might just as easily relate Polo's branching discourse as pertaining to the second type of tree, as he attempts to understand how each city is like his home. In this way, the "dead branches" of his future travels, not only foreclose futures but pasts as well. This structural ambiguity results in that it is hard to say whether the various items, the cities, which constitute the novel are organised according to either model: if their presentation is indeed tree-like, it is rather as if something cut the tree across its crown, and we could now only examine the very finer tips of the leftover branches, knowing they all belong to the same structure, and yet ignorant of their concrete relations.

The solution chanced upon by Polo is ingenious. Instead of trying to account for the tree via its branches, he takes advantage of the fact that a traversal cut of the trunk itself already contains the history of the tree in its tree rings. Contemplating them, Calvino's narrator finds solace precisely where he can take images as a departure point and from them fashion stories:

Then Marco Polo spoke: "Your chessboard, sire, is inlaid with two woods: ebony and maple. The square on which your enlightened gaze is fixed was cut from the ring of a trunk that grew in a year of drought: you see how its fibers are arranged? Here a barely hinted knot can be made out: a bud tried to burgeon on a premature spring day, but the night's frost forced it to desist. (...) The quantity of things that could be read in a little piece of smooth and empty wood overwhelmed Kublai; Polo was already talking about ebony forests, about rafts laden with logs that come down the rivers, of docks, of women at the windows....⁵¹⁰

Only when Polo stands before the register of the tree rings, does his speech regain that "leafy" quality, as opposed to the dryness of melancholy silence – notably, it is at this very moment that their communication begins: "until then," Calvino writes, "the Great Khan had not realized that the foreigner knew how to express himself fluently in his language."

⁵¹⁰ *Invisible Cities*, pp. 118-9.

If dreams had contained in their melancholy listing all possibilities of the endless permutations of the Empire, the chessboard allows for a similar operation since, if the Khan had already conceived it as a microcosm of his domains, Polo can, in front of it, consider the entirety of the Empire without actually moving through it. More importantly, it is as if he could enumerate all its cities – those branches – without being stuck in the itinerary which articulates how they are connected. Before the tree trunk, one masters time.⁵¹¹

Yet, this fruitful contemplation of the chessboard as the trace of a previous tree runs into a number of issues when Polo begins to consider what kind of being could inhabit it:

Here is a thicker pore: perhaps it was a larvum's nest; not a woodworm, because, once born, it would have begun to dig, but a caterpillar that gnawed the leaves and was the cause of the tree's being chosen for chopping down...⁵¹²

As it had been the case of the swallow, Polo conceives of a kind of liberating possibility of movement through the imagination of non-human modes of traversing space. In this case, while he can only look at the tree trunk, which functions as an image of all those possibilities which have materialised by his journeys and stories (the growth of the branches is registered in the growth of the rings), the wormwood can actually move across them.

The caterpillar is a different matter. Conforming to the double protagonist present throughout the text, Polo articulates here a difference between two modes of directly traversing the tree trunk. The woodworm, once again, would move across the rings, which is to say, across the branches unimpeded by their branching. The caterpillar, however, only allows the tree trunk to become visible, after gnawing on its leaves. Not only must the contemplation depend on the death of the tree

⁵¹¹ We recall here what is perhaps the most popular representation of this phenomenon, in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, when Madeleine tries to account for her mysterious existence in Muir Woods, in front of a cut-down tree and next to a baffled Scottie. Fully taking in the image of Polo as an ambassador, there is another interesting comparison between the various imaginings of unorthodox vision in *Invisible Cities* and Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors*: before an inventory of marvels, curiosities, and human ingenuity (and so much of it related to cartography), it is necessary to adopt a literally *eccentric* point-of-view – to contemplate *aslant* – in order to glimpse the real meaning of the work, tied to something beyond human transience.

⁵¹² *Invisible Cities*, p. 118.

and the possibility of travelling through it, but we sense a level of regret in Polo's entomological comparison in the sense that human technique ("chosen for chopping down") must place itself on the way of omniscient, quasi-divine, perspective.

The reduction of this possibility to a technical observation of something in which one cannot participate seems to be what Polo has in mind when, describing the city of Olinda, he compares it to the rings of the trunk of a tree. This city "grows in concentric circles, like the tree trunks which each year add one more ring." Such a place is only perceivable from above; to find it one must "go out carefully and hunt with a magnifying glass."⁵¹³ In other words, once again, contemplating Olinda similarly requires technology to come in the way of sight and a necessary distance from the life of the city itself.

It is hard, thus, not to see some deeper significance in the dashing of these hopes within the larger sense of the failure of Polo's project in *Invisible Cities*. The same, however, cannot be said of *Moby-Dick*: if Polo's ability to contemplate the tree in its entirety depends on the techniques of artificial magnification of sight or forestry, Ishmael's path is very distinct, more complex, and far more fruitful.

As in the case of Polo, Ishmael's discourse is admittedly tree-like, especially when at its most digressive. The beginning of one such digression, which fits into the digressive mode of curiosity ("the crotch alluded to on a previous page deserves independent mention"), is introduced by a similar image: "out of the trunk, the branches grow; out of them, the twigs. So, in productive subjects, grow the chapters."⁵¹⁴ This chapter – "The Crotch" – arrives after a series of chapters in which this 'individuation' is made abundantly clear by their respective opening lines. Thus, of the sequence of chapters "The Line," "Stubb kills a Whale," "The Dart," and finally "The Crotch," (chapters sixty to sixty-four) all but the second comprise descriptive digressions, while "Stubb kills

⁵¹³ *Invisible Cities*, p. 117.

⁵¹⁴ *Moby-Dick*, p. 315.

a Whale” is a fairly regular narrative interlude in this list. In order, the digressions are introduced in the first sentence by the following lines: “with reference to the whaling scene shortly to be described” (“Stubb kills a Whale”) “as well as for the better understanding of all similar scenes elsewhere presented, I have here to speak of the magical, sometimes horrible whale-line”; “a word concerning the incident in the last chapter”;⁵¹⁵ and the introduction to “The Crotch” quoted above. Each chapter takes an element presented before and dives further into it. In other words, Ishmael is choosing a path by selecting one possible branch among many, and his description of *Moby-Dick* as a tree is very apt indeed.

It is not necessary to go once again over the apologetic tone which characterises digressive speech. It is undoubtedly present throughout this sequence, and the last sentence of “The Crotch” only reinforces this impression: almost as if responding to the opening of “The Line,” Ishmael writes “all these particulars are faithfully narrated here, as they will not fail to elucidate several most important, however intricate passages, in scenes hereafter to be painted.”⁵¹⁶ Still, the connection between the various apologies for the perception of possible triviality, inherent in digressions from more action-oriented chapters, and the branching of the novel itself into a tree-like structure, suggest other similar ideas whenever such metaphors reappear – in this way, the figuration of Ahab as a tree which culminates in a “faint blossom of a look, which, in any other man, would have soon flowered out into a smile,”⁵¹⁷ may indeed be “linked to the way that Melville’s prose blossoms” and to a sheer delight before ornamentation and “linguistic uselessness,”⁵¹⁸ as Theo Davis notes, that is, the way by which it digresses. It is hard not to read Ishmael’s use of the word “productive” when invoking the image of the tree as both a defence of his penchant for digression as well as self-conscious irony.

⁵¹⁵ *Moby-Dick*, pp. 303, 313.

⁵¹⁶ *Moby-Dick*, p. 316.

⁵¹⁷ *Moby-Dick*, pp. 315, 136.

⁵¹⁸ Theo Davis. *Op. cit.*, p. 36.

If one of the most fundamental issues of *Moby-Dick* concerns the means and possibilities of representing the whale in literature, this question too will be very explicitly drawn to reflections on the tree as a mode of literary representation and its relation with trivial *versus* essential. When it comes to the whale, however, the tree metaphor is uniquely complex: on the one hand, as mentioned above, it stands for an image of the ways by which the novel has, so far, taken up the task of telling a tale at the same time as it digresses into a number of subjects, each meaning to represent the whale in some way. On the other hand, Ishmael's recurring concern with taxonomy and the classification of maritime creatures, in chapters such as "Cetology" or, significantly, "The Squid", the latter arriving right before the sequence mentioned above, place the whale in another kind of relation with the notion of tree: the tree of beings and evolution. The two issues are brought together, providing some of Ishmael's deepest concerns and reflections. More importantly, the tree as representation of the whale, is capable of vindicating the conception of the novel as a tree, since, through it, Ishmael begins to articulate a way out of curiosity and melancholy.

In "Cetology," Ishmael's "systematised exhibition of the whale" respects the kind of tree structure characteristic of other classificatory projects of nineteenth-century natural sciences (despite his disparaging comments on the subject): the classified whales are presented in a stratified and hierarchical tree-system consisting of "three primary BOOKS (subdivisible into Chapters)"; a connection further strengthened by comparing whales and the jargon of bookbinders: there are "folio whales," "octavo whales," and "duodecimo whales."⁵¹⁹ This aspect of the project of representing the whale through literature seems to resist the kind of freedom which Ishmael had previously attributed to his own arboreal discourse, mimicking in its own arboreality, instead, the strict principles of those scientific representations of the tree of life and the evolutionary development of beings which he, at the same time, explicitly denies.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁹ *Moby-Dick*, pp. 148-9.

⁵²⁰ More famously, by declaring that whales are fish.

This tree, however, cast the longest shadow on Ishmael's concerns. Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* may have been nine years away. Yet, like many other naturalists of the time, Ishmael is sadly aware of the consequences of understanding the whale (or any other being) in articulation with the flow of historical time and with the tree diagram as a representation of temporal beings: extinction.⁵²¹ And if the literary representation of the whale within the tree can do nothing but repeat scientific knowledge presented elsewhere and, more importantly, not allow him to introduce his own ideas as "twigs" belonging to the same "trunk," this fate extends to his own writing as well.

It is important to note that early-nineteenth-century American culture tended to treat the whale precisely as an elusive and ambiguous representative of nature's ability to transcend human epistemological systems:

whales, in New York in the early nineteenth century, could still be understood as exceptional, indeed, even as "wonders": they defied familiar categories in natural history, and were perhaps best treated as remarkable singularities, rather than as exemplifying any particular natural kind. As Sir John Falstaff said of the otter—invoking the clerical taxonomies that governed Friday meals—there were some creatures that were simply problematic: "she's neither fish nor flesh; a man knows not where to have her." Vast and anomalous, whales figured significantly as creatures that defied easy identification, and they eluded the clear and distinct grasp of the inquiring eye and mind: not for nothing had the expression "very like a whale" come to mean in familiar English, "I don't know what you are talking about," or, more pointedly, "I don't believe you."⁵²²

In this regard, Ishmael's ambivalence is as his as it is part of well-known and widely discussed topics of the time,⁵²³ both in its resistance to scientific taxonomies and in the language of "wonder" applied to the whale as a being which defies description – "Cetology" is more than personal

⁵²¹ Mark A. Ragan. "Trees and Networks Before and After Darwin." *Biology Direct* 4.43 (2009).

⁵²² D. Graham Burnett. *Trying Leviathan: The Nineteenth-Century Court Case That Put the Whale on Trial and Challenged the Order of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. eBook.

⁵²³ Burnett's book, quoted above, concerns a civil dispute regarding the proper taxing of whale oil, which depended on its classification as either fish or mammal and details extensively the public's suspicion when confronted with scientific proof brought before the court.

diatribe. However, his adopted stance is, unsurprisingly, contradictory, and reflections on how to present the whale in writing become the source of internal debate. Sometimes he appears to align himself with the scientific community, presenting his “credentials as a geologist,” or displaying an elementary, and yet solid, knowledge of the theory of stratigraphic evidence, for example.⁵²⁴ In fact, his reluctance before the idea that the whale could one day be nothing but a fossil would not contrast too much with the likes of Comte de Buffon⁵²⁵ or Augustin Augier, who were ready to accept the diversification of beings and their organisation into tree structures but not extinction. We also hear the spirit of the Cuvier or Linnaean anatomist in moments when the task of representing the whale is described as requiring the kind of individuation which characterises the tree, “not overlooking the minutest seminal germs of his blood, and spinning him out to the uttermost coil of his bowels.” The very idea of getting to the heart of a subject is in one instance presented as a kind of philosophical palaeontology, as it involves getting “one’s hands among the unspeakable foundations, ribs, and very pelvis of the world.”⁵²⁶

At other moments the sensibility shifts and this kind of deconstructive approach is replaced by *ekphrasis*: the goal now is not dissection but “to put the *living* whale before you.” Because “the sperm whale, scientific *or* poetic, lives not complete in any literature,” even when he is exhaustively listing “the monstrous pictures of whales” his stated goal is to “paint to you as well as one can without canvas, something like the true form of the whale as he actually appears to the eye of the whaleman.”⁵²⁷ In such moments, Ishmael might even disparage Cuvier’s arguments or compare (in a joke at the expense of utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham) any obsession with bones with

⁵²⁴ “In the earlier geological strata there are found the fossils of monsters now completely extinct.” *Moby-Dick*, p. 497.

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⁵²⁶ *Moby-Dick*, pp. 496, 147.

⁵²⁷ *Moby-Dick*, p. 285. My emphasis.

literal superficial ignorance.⁵²⁸ In this way, he enacts a defence of his own willingness to remain on branching, digressive, topics.

Expressions such as “living,” “true form,” or “as he actually appears” may suggest a preference. However, the solution he chances upon is far more complicated. If *ekphrasis* conjures ideas of revelation, and yet bones and body parts are what is available for study, Ishmael conjoins the two into his own brand of archaeology as mystical practice:

When I stand among these mighty Leviathan skeletons, skulls, tusks, jaws, ribs, and vertebræ, all characterized by partial resemblances to the existing breeds of sea-monsters; but at the same time bearing on the other hand similar affinities to the annihilated antechronical Leviathans, their incalculable seniors; I am, by a flood, borne back to that wondrous period, ere time itself can be said to have begun; for time began with man. Here Saturn’s grey chaos rolls over me, and I obtain dim, shuddering glimpses into those Polar eternities; (...) Who can show a pedigree like Leviathan? (...) I am horrorstruck at this antemosaic, unsourced existence of the unspeakable terrors of the whale, having been before all time, must needs exist after all humane ages are over.⁵²⁹

In the first place, Ishmael liberally rephrases the core tenets of comparative evolutionary anatomy: the whale’s bones have “partial resemblances” to other existing creatures as well as to extinct ones, and the excerpt quoted follows a short list of fossil whale discoveries. And yet, what he therefore posits is not an existence for the whale inscribed in historical time (in which it had a beginning and will have an end) but a kind of wishful thinking which renders it eternal despite scientific facts:⁵³⁰ on the fossils of ancient creatures, he claims that “though none of them precisely answer to any

⁵²⁸ “For it is one of the most curious things about this Leviathan, that his skeleton gives very little idea of his general shape. Though Jeremy Bentham’s skeleton, which hangs for candelabra in the library of one of his executors, correctly conveys the idea of a burly-browed utilitarian old gentleman, with all Jeremy’s other leading personal characteristics; yet nothing of this kind could be inferred from any leviathan’s articulated bones.” *Moby-Dick*, p. 289. Melville’s own criticism of utilitarianism (in relation to war) can be further exemplified by his poem “A Utilitarian’s View of the Monitor’s Flight.”

⁵²⁹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 498.

⁵³⁰ Something strikingly similar to Quentin Meillasoux’s “arche-fossil,” that scientific object which might confound us by our ability to locate them in time even if they precede human existence. It is worth it to confront the excerpt quotes above and Meillasoux’s text, although that comparison exceeds the matter of the current chapter. See Quentin Meillasoux. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. London: Continuum, 2008.

known species of the present time, they are yet sufficiently akin to them in general respects, to justify their taking rank as Cetacean fossils.”⁵³¹

The real meaning of Ishmael’s argument and reconfiguring of the tree structure arrives as the chapter transforms from a tendentious enumeration of scientific data, and begins instead to inscribe the whale in a different kind of “pedigree.”⁵³² The mounting references to Methuselah, Solomon, or Mahomet suggest a different kind of ascendancy, already suggested in earlier chapters such as “The Honor and Glory of Whaling,” in which he lists “Perseus, St. George, Hercules, Jonah, and Vishnoo”⁵³³ as illustrious members of the mythical, not historical, catalogue of whale hunters.

Furthermore, to say that “time began with man” is to claim for the whale a genealogy and kinship that is not solely that of the fossil as a natural artefact, but also ancestral, biblical, mythological, and literary. The ‘tree’ of the whale, if it is to offer that “true form,” must account for all such modes – in large measure, this is a fair description of the project of *Moby-Dick* and its tendency to digress precisely into such subjects and paint the whale from various perspectives. The final words of the chapter immediately after reveal the full extent of Ishmael’s intentions: answering the question in the chapter’s title, which is a direct response to the crude facts of palaeontology, “Does the Whale’s Magnitude Diminish?—Will He Perish?,” his position is an emphatic *no*.⁵³⁴

In this encounter, Ishmael also finally establishes a possible productive avenue out of melancholy, as he arrives at the chief goal stated in “Loomings” – the whale – and yet not anymore with a curious disposition. Two references are here key: the first is melancholy itself (“Saturn’s grey chaos”), described as an overwhelming experience, allowing Ishmael to see the entirety of time not as an amorphous accumulation of meaningless events but in the mystical mode of the revelation

⁵³¹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 497.

⁵³² Interestingly, *pedigree* comes from the Anglo-French *pé de grue*, originally in reference to the similarity between the bird’s foot and the tree structure.

⁵³³ *Moby-Dick*, p. 398.

⁵³⁴ “We account the whale immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality. He swam the seas before the continents broke water; he once swam over the site of the Tuileries, and Windsor Castle, and the Kremlin. In Noah’s flood he despised Noah’s Ark; and if ever the world is to be again flooded, like the Netherlands, to kill off its rats, then the eternal whale will still survive.” *Moby-Dick*, p. 504.

which compresses infinite time and knowledge into a single momentary vision – in this case, the history of the earth. This is no longer the alliterative time of “whenevers” of his melancholy, but a new time of perpetual “always.”

Secondly, the similarity in terms between this encounter with the whale and the previous meeting with Fedallah signals the discovery of a new mode of facing the unknown, not anymore cast in the mode of curiosity but of wonder. Fedallah belongs to the time when men “eyed each other as real phantoms,” and the whale is often described precisely as a “phantom.”⁵³⁵ More significant perhaps, is their mutual inscription into the timeless era before history, since Fedallah also belongs to “those insulated, immemorial, unalterable countries, which even in these modern days still preserve much of the ghostly aboriginalness of earth’s primal generations.”⁵³⁶

The epistemological difficulties that Ishmael felt when looking at Fedallah for the time (he “remained (...) a mystery to the last”) are here turned from a dead-end into a step in Ishmael’s development from someone who engages with the curious and recognises its limitations, into someone who faces the “wondrous” and finds therein solace. The fact that Fedallah’s first appearance mixes him with the *curios* which result from the colonial enterprise is also significant. If the ‘whiteness’ of the whale is often interpreted in its contagious and world-consuming terror as a metaphor for the tragedies of white colonialist expansion⁵³⁷ (and perhaps, more importantly for Melville, the issues this process causes for the possibilities of democracy and human understanding), the return of melancholy and the failure of curiosity are tied with any epistemological mode which makes *curios* out of human beings.

Unsurprisingly, in the end, neither the whale nor Fedallah bring about the conclusion of Ishmael’s therapy. His long journey had started already at the moment when he met Queequeg and

⁵³⁵ The more extensive analysis of this recurrence of the phantasmagorical theme is provided in detail in the chapter “Listing as Naming.”

⁵³⁶ *Moby-Dick*, p. 252.

⁵³⁷ Once again, it is very significant that Melville’s chapter appears as satire and subversion of Browne’s chapter on blackness, whose list arrives promptly after the chapter “Of the Blackness of *Negroes*.”

felt the initial pangs of discomfort of curiosity. Describing him in this moment as “an interminable Cretan labyrinth of a figure,”⁵³⁸ it is as if Ishmael already intuits the failure of strict itineraries, and the role of Queequeg as a guide capable of traversing complex spaces of interconnected paths. It is when he elevates him from human *curio* to wondrous Other that he arrives at his destination, even if, in the pursuit of curiosity, it takes him a whole novel to realise this.

Ishmael and Marco Polo arrive at very similar conclusions, after their recognition that curiosity will never productively address the root of melancholy. Both of them compare their own speech to trees; and both of them posit an ideal mode of discourse as ‘tree-like’, being premised on the ability to look at the whole tree structure at once. Within the structure of these tree structures, texts such as *Moby-Dick* or *Invisible Cities* display a desire to grow into arborescence while remaining highly ambiguous lists. Navigating the space between the techniques of inventorying and itinerancy, tree diagrams “concern the threshold,” Weigel underlines, between “counting and recounting.”

The tree structure is recognised as possessing some ability to leverage the positive aspects of the itineraries of curiosity and the digressiveness of melancholy, harmonising their incongruities, and without falling into contradiction. If curiosity was grounded on the difference between ‘known’ and ‘unknown’ which the itinerary captures so well in its articulating of the difference and process between ‘here’ and ‘there’, wonder arrives indeed, as Heidegger wrote, as a shattering of difference: a positive disorientation, “not knowing the way out or the way in,” and “displac[ing] man out of the confusing irresolvability of the usual and the unusual.”⁵³⁹ Replacing curiosity with wonder, in other words, they retain the ability to look at the whole tree at once, and freely take up itineraries which their choices would have otherwise barred them from choosing.

But a comparison between *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Cities* in the terms which we have proposed here, cannot but register their profoundly distinct outcomes. The similarities go beyond

⁵³⁸ *Moby-Dick*, p. 28.

⁵³⁹ Martin Heidegger. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995, pp. 145-6.

what we have enumerated. Like Polo, Ishmael also indulges in the imagination of insectile ontologies in order to propose distinct ways of traversing, in his case, literature itself:

It will be seen that this mere painstaking burrower and grub-worm of a poor devil of a Sub-Sub appears to have gone through the long Vaticans and street-stalls of the earth, picking up whatever random allusions to whales he could find in any book whatsoever, sacred or profane.⁵⁴⁰

The grub-worm, like the reader or writer, moves across books, but not across sentences. That the “Sub-Sub” chapter, which is nothing but a long list of citations about whales, seems to conform to a kind of idealised version of Ishmael’s project, is not insignificant (as is not the fact that he too is ill) – it is a literal version of what he claims to give us in “Whiteness of the Whale.” Like the swallow of Esmeralda, the Sub-Sub possesses “a glancing bird’s eye view,” which affords him a singular ability to conjoin all which has been “said, thought, fancied, and sung of Leviathan, by many nations and generations, including our own.”⁵⁴¹

Yet, the fact that in *Invisible Cities* this sort of contemplation comprises a dead end while in *Moby-Dick* it is one of two appendices preceding the work is not irrelevant. While it is clear that Ishmael, by surviving as a spectator and being able to provide a report of what took place, achieved the goal of writing the whale (even if the circular nature of the novel asks some difficult questions on this matter which we do not take up here), Marco Polo’s end is far more ambiguous. While the invitation to read *Moby-Dick* as a ‘tree’ list works fairly well, the same cannot really be said about *Invisible Cities*. Perhaps the difference lies in the two very different imaginations of sight which Polo and Ishmael attribute to the ability to experience wonder: in the case of the first, as we have said, sight is aided by technological instruments, while, in the case of the second, technique (at least, scientific technique) is gradually invalidated until what remains is mystical sight. Perhaps this is why if, when finishing *Moby-Dick*, we might reread it and encounter the famous first sentence

⁵⁴⁰ *Moby-Dick*, p. xxxix.

⁵⁴¹ *Moby-Dick*, p. xxxix.

("call me Ishmael") as the successful result of the therapeutic process about to be described, the two characters of *Invisible Cities* seem oddly fated to keep on doubting their own existence.

II. Listing as Circumscribing

Le mur, on le sait, appelle l'écriture.

— Roland Barthes

In the previous section, we analysed the various operations which concern the production of items in the list – its accumulative dimension – under the header of the *technique of counting*. For each text and example, we have also given some attention to the ways by which this technique reveals certain particular diagrammatical models and principles: the line, the tree, the table, or, even slightly vaguer, the house plan. Far from being collateral qualities and observations, the lists we analysed cannot dispense with these aspects: like diagrams, as Sybille Krämer and Christina Ljungberg write, lists easily become “hybrids of the iconic and the discursive,”⁵⁴² with meaning deriving from their status as hybrids, neither aspect taking precedence over the other. “Scripts, lists, tables, graphs, and maps” are also “graphical artifacts” related to the notion of diagram,⁵⁴³ Krämer observes in what is perhaps a simple reframing of what Bernard Sève describes as “une des idées les plus fécondes de Goody” and, after all, a fact with which we must contend: that lists are produced by a series of graphical operations.⁵⁴⁴

The most important diagrammatical quality of lists arrives before the models enumerated above become identifiable. What we term here as the *technique of circumscribing* refers to one of the gestures which precede the *list* itself and constitute an inalienable part of *listing*: the act of drawing a conceptual frame around disparate things. In other words, the graphical dimension of the technique of listing precedes its material reality. What we propose here is an analysis of the list from this point of view: as diagrammatical imaginations of space. In this sense, this chapter aims to

⁵⁴² Sybille Krämer, Christina Ljungberg. “Thinking and Diagrams – An Introduction.” *Thinking with Diagrams: The Semiotic Basis of Human Cognition*. Boston: De Gruyter, 2016, p. 1.

⁵⁴³ Sybille Krämer. “Is there a diagrammatic impulse with Plato? ‘Quasi-diagrammatic-scenes’ in Plato’s philosophy.” *Op. cit.*, p. 163.

⁵⁴⁴ Bernard Sève. *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

gather all the works under an analysis of the diagrammatical principles they share in common, treating the diagram of the list also as a site of debate and meta-reflection within the texts and their listing practices.

To Enter the Lists: Etymology, Play, and Horizons

Attempts to explain what a list is or does may take other – albeit less common – forms, besides its accumulative or enumerative properties. Throughout academic and non-specialised literature, we identify a series of definitions concerned not with the list as a technique of counting or naming, but as what we might term a ‘technique of delimitation’ or ‘containment’. One tradition in particular – unfolding from Goody’s anthropology to Young’s media studies – emphasises this aspect by focusing on a now relatively obscure meaning of the word “list,” having to do “with ‘the border, edging strip, selvage of a cloth’.”⁵⁴⁵ In its “first plane of usage,” Young writes, *list* “denotes ‘border, edging, strip’.”⁵⁴⁶ He continues:

From here come the ‘lists’ of battle. This second sense more forcefully implies lists as containing rather than the more general line or strip of earlier usage. But both early meanings of ‘list’, as border and as boundary, demonstrate that the term has always been used to describe various cultural techniques of collection and separation.⁵⁴⁷

Historically and etymologically, *list* is closer to this delimitative or framing impulse than to the other two techniques to which it might be more immediately associated; it was first and foremost a graphical, material, technique of framing, as David Matthews explains, using the example of Chaucer: “what [Chaucer] would have understood by the word ‘list,’ however, was the piece of the

⁵⁴⁵ Jack Goody. *Op. cit.*, p. 80.

⁵⁴⁶ Incidentally, we find this usage also in *Pseudodoxia*: “thus the Ass having a peculiar mark of a cross made by a black *list* down his back, and another athwart, or at right angles down his shoulders.” See *Pseudodoxia*, p. 475. If in English such meanings remained bound to a single word, in French, for instance, as well as in Portuguese, the words *lice* and *liça*, respectively, took on the meaning of arena, even if *liste* and *lista* still preserve that sense which in English would nowadays be accurately translated as *stripe*. As such, the Portuguese expression *animal listado* (listed animal) carries the ambiguous meaning of a creature simultaneously striped and enumerated – that is, just like the list.

⁵⁴⁷ Liam Cole Young. *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

paper or perhaps cloth on which a series of items were written down, not the words on the paper themselves or the concept of a rank of similar or related items.”⁵⁴⁸

The list precedes, in other words, its own discursive dimension. Stanley Fish’s famous exercise described in the essay “How To Recognise a Poem When You See One” is a perfect example of listing as framing,⁵⁴⁹ as is Wes Anderson’s recent *Spitzmaus Mummy in a Coffin and other Treasures* exhibition in Vienna’s *Kunsthistorisches Museum*:

While Juman Malouf and I take no credit for the conception and creation of any of the works of art included in this exhibition, we do harbor the humble aspiration that the unconventional groupings and arrangement of the works on display may influence the study of art and antiquity in minor, even trivial, but nevertheless detectable ways for many future generations to come.⁵⁵⁰

The list as conceived in this way is less connected with its abstract content (which can even be, as in Fish’s exercise, arbitrary or, as Anderson notes, entirely created by someone else) than with its material qualities. The list becomes a material *thing* in physical space, and listing refers to the activity of delineating where this space begins and ends – not the work of *inscription* but of *circumscription*.

These etymological considerations find some correspondence and confirmation in other discussions. Robert E. Belknap and Valentina Izmirlieva have provided definitions which prise a similar role of the list as limit while confronting some of the deeper implications of this approach. Belknap, for instance, writes that “lists are frameworks that hold separate and disparate items together,” “flexible structures,”⁵⁵¹ underlining in this way precisely the ability of the gesture of framing to lend coherence to an array of items which have become *listed*, and as “formalized

⁵⁴⁸ David Matthews. “Enlisting the Poet: The List and the Late Medieval Dream Vision.” *Style* 50.3 (2016), p. 285.

⁵⁴⁹ “The fact that the names appeared in a list that was arranged vertically, and that Levin, Thorne, and Hayes formed a column that was more or less centered in relation to the paired names of Jacobs and Rosenbaum, was similarly accidental (...). In the time between the two classes I made only one change. I drew a frame around the assignment and wrote on the top of that frame ‘p. 43.’” Stanley Fish. “How to Recognise a Poem When You See One.” *Is There a Text In This Class?: The Authority of Interpretative Communities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980, p. 323.

⁵⁵⁰ Wes Anderson. *Spitzmaus Mummy in a Coffin and other Treasures*. Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 2018, p. 3.

⁵⁵¹ Robert E. Belknap. *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

block[s] of information,”⁵⁵² hinting at the material, rather than conceptual, limits of the list. But such notions might raise, in the words of Francis Spufford, “an uncomfortable question:” are lists a “unified category of literary endeavour” or merely a “name for something completely determined by what is put in it, like a paragraph”? Musing further, he quizzingly notes that “a device that can contain anything comes perilously close to being a device that is nothing in itself.”⁵⁵³

Izmirlieva approaches this problem from the opposite perspective. Perhaps owing to an intellectual affinity with her object of study (mysticism and divine names), she has no qualm when it comes to imagining the items of the list as things which do not exist but can, nevertheless, be “circumscribed” and thus made visible:

a list is a verbal model of serial arrangement: it *circumscribes* a group of lexical units—names, in our case—and displays them in a fixed, syntactic sequence. The most visible effect of this arrangement is that the list (mis)represents a set of lexical elements as equivalent terms. It provides a *site for the cohabitation of words* and in that capacity alone predicates a kinship upon the words’ referents. Stubbornly ignoring everything that makes its members different, a list is fixed upon the one thing that makes them alike, even if that is only their presence in the list, “the simple crime of contingency.”⁵⁵⁴

Like any other technique, the list imposes itself on the Real and orders it into visibility by operationalising one of its fundamental distinctions: inside vs. outside. The drawing of the limit which renders its inside thinkable is one of the exemplary cultural techniques, as described by Vismann in her famous example of the plough which draws the line which in turn creates both territory and political subject.⁵⁵⁵ To consider the list as a framing device is to consider its ability to

⁵⁵² *Idem*, pp. 14-5.

⁵⁵³ Francis Spufford. *Op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁵⁵⁴ Valentina Izmirlieva. *All the Names of the Lord: Lists and Mysticism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 54. My emphasis.

⁵⁵⁵ “To start with an elementary and archaic cultural technique, a plough drawing a line in the ground: the agricultural tool determines the political act; and the operation itself produces the subject (...). Thus, the Imperium Romanum is the result of drawing a line – a gesture which, not accidentally, was held sacred in Roman law. Someone advances to the position of legal owner in a similar fashion, by drawing a line, marking one’s territory – ownership does not exist prior to that act.” Cornelia Vismann. “Cultural Techniques and Sovereignty.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 30.6 (2013), p. 84. We note also that Webster asserts the verb “list” as “to produce furrows and ridges (on land) with a lister” and “to prepare (ground) for planting by making ridges and furrows.” See “List.” *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Granary Books, 1996, p. 1121.

bring together, to draw a line around, distinct objects which become listed *only* by property of being declared as belonging to a list. To make a list, in this view, is to merely call it as such, to determine that a group of things which were unrelated and chaotic are now bounded by being in the same list and sharing the same space. Thus, beyond just “collection and separation” – inclusion and exclusion –, we can consider the list as limit also as a technique of territorial delimitation concerned with the symbolic conversion of space into place. The technique of the list becomes, in this way, the preparation of a “site for the cohabitation” of its constituents – a work of *curation*. As the texts will show, framing the list is also to engage in a kind of ‘technique of cohabitation’, to ask: can these terms live together harmoniously and, if so, how?

The limit has come to be associated with a number of functions in the list which renders it indispensable. In practical terms, the limits of the list and their importance show up in a variety of ways. In her analysis of Icelandic Eddic catalogue poetry in an oral context, for example, Elizabeth Jackson offers a short yet useful catalogue of different “listing devices,” stressing the importance of framing, opening, or closing devices in the generation and reception of the list.⁵⁵⁶ “List signals” or “distinctive opening items/item pairs” – such as stating the rubric or alliterative couplets – provide unambiguous ways of announcing the list. In the written list there are also limits which we tend to ignore just as much as we might find their absence unnerving, namely, the blank space which often separates the list from narrative portions and shapes its familiar textual display.

Whether graphical, rhythmic, or rhetorical, all such limits perform a similar task to the more abstract notion of the list as a boundary: to clearly demarcate it from its surroundings; to explicitly erect an inside from which the outside is carefully excluded. Georges Perec offers a suggestion as to why we might wish to be careful in maintaining these boundaries. In his words, “il y a dans l’idée que rien au monde n’est assez unique pour ne pas pouvoir entrer dans une liste, quelque chose

⁵⁵⁶ Elizabeth Jackson. “‘Not Simply Lists’: An Eddic Perspective on Short-Item Lists in Old-English Poems.” *Speculum* 73 (1998), p. 343-4.

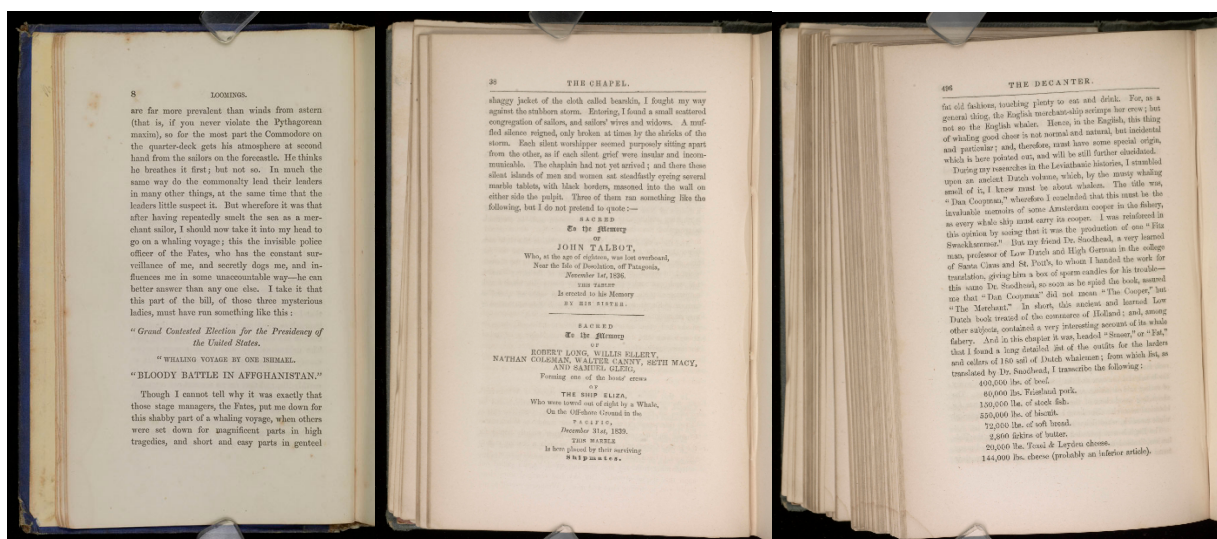


Fig. 2: In these three examples from various editions *Moby-Dick*, the habitual textual display of the list is unmistakable, as is the separation between these lists and everything else.

d'exaltant et de terrifiant à la fois."⁵⁵⁷ Clear limits set up boundaries which, even if porous, help to curb a total contagion. They derive their importance directly from a feature of the list which we have analysed in the previous section: its flattening effect, contagious precisely due to its structural disallowance of difference or value. The trivial and the digressive become radically non-exclusionary, to the point where inside and outside become indistinguishable. The joys and terrors of vertigo require boundaries and the ability of the list to not end, to threaten an invitation to the entirety of the cosmos at all times leads one to repeatedly stress the importance of said boundaries.

We might put the issue in another way, taking a cue from the etymological relationship between list and the lists of jousting, by equating this contagious cosmic impulse with a state of *total play* – the list as a mode of literary discourse which can take anything and everything into games of free reversion and juxtaposition. Roger Caillois explains well the need for the existence of limits whenever a state of play is initiated:

In effect, play is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life, and generally is engaged in with precise limits of time and place. There is place for play:

⁵⁵⁷ Georges Perec. *Penser/Classer*. Paris: Hachette, 1985. eBook.

as needs dictate, the space for hopscotch, the board for checkers or chess, the stadium, the racetrack, *the list*, the ring, the stage, the arena, etc...⁵⁵⁸

Just as games are “carefully isolated from the rest of life,” we have seen time and time again how the list-maker is often advised to keep their lists carefully isolated from the rest of literature, both by using those kinds of signals mentioned above or by verbally disallowing their lists in some way. And just as play is defined by its unproductiveness, “creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind,”⁵⁵⁹ so does the list as a technique of counting revel in the trivial, digressive, purposeless, unproductive. Returning to Perec, the idea that the list’s state of total play can contaminate life with an unbearable logic is as exciting as it is terrifying.

We can summarise all this in two points which show a relation of mutual dependency between the technique of circumscription and the previously analysed technique of counting. On the one hand, the effect of flattening would seem to be necessary if the act of circumscription can, as Izmirlijeva observes, serve as a vehicle to misrepresent the relations between the list’s constituents – otherwise, we would be stuck with the same relations (hierarchical, chronological) which those constituents carried prior to the act of circumscription. On the other hand, the limit itself is a crucial response to the consequences of flattening itself: the limit serves to establish that area of safe play, clearly demarcated from regular life.

The notion of play can also be taken up in a different sense which brings us back to diagrammatical and even material considerations. Thinking once again about Fish’s exercise and its ability to make a *thing* come about where there was none before, play also points towards a particular notion of materiality (*thingness*) of the list form: not only is play often part of the literary processes which help to generate items for the list, but one is expected to also play with the list as if it is an object, a *thing*. Returning to Goody’s idea that “when an utterance is put in writing, it can be inspected in much greater detail, in its parts as well as in its whole, backwards as well as forwards,

⁵⁵⁸ Roger Caillois. *Man, Play and Games*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001, p. 6. My emphasis.

⁵⁵⁹ *Idem*, p. 10.

out of context as well as in its setting,”⁵⁶⁰ we can say that the ontological flattening allowing for such operations of manipulation (rendering the items freely interchangeable) is a consequence of the literal flattening of thought into a material, written, diagrammatic form.

These remarks could be interpreted as signalling an attention to the study of the material conditions of the texts in the *corpus*. And indeed, they are all produced under very distinct writing cultures. Moreover, the very material existence of these texts and our ability to perform the operations of circumscription is precisely what grounds a central premise of this thesis: like Fish, we have taken a text, and declared it a list.

However, we must here make an important caveat and clarify what is our concern in this chapter: as Krämer explains, the flattening of the paper is more accidental than the conceptual flattening of thought implied in the transition from abstraction into diagram.⁵⁶¹ In other words, the characteristic diagrammatical form of the list *precedes* its inscription in the paper *because* one is supposed to engage with it as if it was already arranged on a flat surface. This idea is crucial: the list is not a graphical form because it is the product of graphical operations of writing. It is a graphical form because the abstract operations which it facilitates are already diagrammatical and, to an extent, graphical in nature. Before being inscribed into a flat surface, the list was already flat. The flat surface serves the list, not the other way around. And what will occupy us here is the study of the abstract diagrammaticality of the list, which is certainly reflected in its ‘hard’ material conditions, but were, above all, conditioned by the ‘soft’ mode of thought (to return to Goody and the Sumerologists) which preceded it.

The central question of this chapter, then, concerns the ways by which certain concepts allow us to interact with and talk about lists as an abstract space; concepts such as sight, border,

⁵⁶⁰ Jack Goody. *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

⁵⁶¹ “As a surface without depth, without a ‘subface’, an artificial space is produced in which everything that is inscribed or drawn can be overseen, manipulated and controlled. Flatness cancels the unobservable and uncontrollable ‘back’ and ‘below’.” Sybille Krämer. “From Dissemination to Digitality: How to Reflect on Media.” *Media Theory* 5.2 (2021), p. 84.

distance, periphery, etc. It is one of the richest ideas in Kramer's exposition that an embodied conception of abstract thought can render it operationable. In the case of lists, the very notion of limit, of inside and outside, or of modes of disposition which facilitate operations of free digression and juxtaposition, conjure a specific kind of space in which the game of the list is to be imaginatively enacted – an imagination of space which necessarily contaminates the literary language used to describe it and the author's own relation with the list. They become "spatial forms to the non-spatial," allowing for new modes of operations of production and interaction:

When placed on a simple sheet of paper or on the surface of a blackboard, thoughts acquire a place in the most literal sense of the word: spatio-temporally situated, they become not only thinkable, but also visible and tangible. (...) The surface of the inscription not only builds a representational space for thought, but it also constructs a space of operation: within this space we can – to formulate a paradox – undertake empirical investigation with non-empirical objects.⁵⁶²

Because "diagrams make relations *visible*," one is pressed to think not only of its imagined space as a stale disposition of things but as something one is *in*, something that is *seen*:

If ever the notion of the 'mind's eye' is to make sense, then it must be here, in the act of using the visible to see the non-visible: in this way in-sight becomes possible. (...) Through its interaction with the diagram, looking takes on the form of an 'intuitive thought' or a 'thoughtful intuition'.⁵⁶³

In granting abstract notions a degree of materiality, in implying a transformation of space into place, the list requires the list-maker – and the list-reader – to imagine themselves in a physical relation to the listed. What kind of "in-sight" are we talking about here? What are the physical and spatial consequences of thinking the diagram of the list, if we take, as a point of departure, the result of our previous analyses? Paraphrasing from Doreen Massey, such operations result in "imaginative geographies" which can bring "the exotic" and "the banal" into "unexpected juxtaposition," from

⁵⁶² Sybille Krämer. *Op. cit.*, p. 164.

⁵⁶³ *Idem*.

which she underlines the ability “to create spaces where you might come upon the unexpected, have chance encounters”⁵⁶⁴ – in other words, the answer should start with the very notion of digression.

Nathalie Kremer notes how digressions are one of three fundamental strategies (besides “les *dédoublements* du temps” and “l’ouverture aux *possibles*”) for the development of narrative in a spatial, rather than purely temporal, sense. On the famous digression in the *Odyssey*, she notes how the narrative development present in that episode is less well represented by the image of the line than by the image of the concentric circle. Quoting from Daniel Mendelsohn, she writes:

Pour Mendelsohn, le développement digressif du récit prend ici la forme d’un « cercle concentrique », qui détient « la clé de toute l’épopée » : « le meilleur moyen de raconter un certain type d’histoire n’est pas de suivre une ligne droite mais de procéder par larges cercles chargés de récits secondaires et d’anecdotes. Par tours et détours ».⁵⁶⁵

Indeed, the circle will often figure in the texts as a crucial figure in the context of thinking about the consequences of a mode of writing characterised by digression, the most important of which is, as we have repeatedly emphasised in the previous chapter, the effect of ontological flattening, which requires that everything be equally at-hand, that the list offer us an illusion of simultaneity.

Here we see that the relationship between de-hierarchisation and circularity is no mere accident, as Georges Poulet explains in his work on this geometric metaphor in European literature:

En tant que circonférence infinie l’éternité est donc le cercle le plus vaste possible de durée; en tant que centre de cette circonférence, elle est le point fixe, le moment unique, *qui est simultanément en rapport avec tous les points circonférentiels de cette durée*. Qui veut donc embrasser en pensée les deux propriétés contradictoires de l’éternité divine (...) doit s’identifier avec l’immense circonférence qui embrasse toutes durées, mais aussi avec le point central qui exclut toute durée. *Il doit se porter simultanément à la circonférence et au centre*.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶⁴ Doreen Massey. *Op. cit.*, p. 180.

⁵⁶⁵ Nathalie Kremer. “L’Espace du Récit.” *Poétique: Revue de Théorie et d’Analyse Littéraires* 192 (2022), p. 91.

⁵⁶⁶ Georges Poulet. *Les Métamorphoses du Cercle*. Paris: Librairie Plon, 1961, pp. v-vi.

If the list-maker imagines themselves to be at the centre, everything which comprises the list comprises also a *horizon*⁵⁶⁷ where everything must be equally accessible at all times. To imagine oneself at the centre of a circle is also to imagine every point in the circumference as equidistant from oneself. In order for every point of the list to be accessible by the list-maker at any moment, they must all be at the same distance from them; the circle is the only shape whose diagram fulfils this condition.⁵⁶⁸

Accordingly, the texts in our corpus will repeatedly contend with circular imagery in order to convey and, most importantly, navigate, such concepts. The diagram of the circular list becomes a site of reflection and debate concerned with the possibilities of literature and lists themselves: what does it mean to be at the centre? What is a circumference? Is the circle closed or open? Does it move or is it static? And finally, the most important question of all: where should the list-maker be in relation to their circle? Tackling these questions, we analyse how the texts articulate the possibility of literary creation within a number of different conceptual containers: the geographies of empire in *The Pillow Book* and *Invisible Cities*, the microcosmic imaginations of Melville and Browne who draw parallels between bodies and cosmos as conceptual frames, and the humble countryside abode of Bouvard et Pécuchet which, in turning itself into a museum, becomes the perfect encapsulation of the list as site for harmonious (and literal) co-habitation.

⁵⁶⁷ *Horizon* begot *horizontal* and originates in the Greek *horizōn kyklos* – ὁρίζων –, or “bounding circle”).

⁵⁶⁸ It is in this vein that we can understand a myriad of diagrammatical images and imaginations of place grounded on this same at-handedness and a seemingly inevitable roundedness, such as, for instance, Latour’s emphasis on the *democratic* character underlying the necessity for a “Parliament of Things” or Giulio Camillo’s theatre of memory, as described by Frances Yates: “Camillo’s Theatre represents the universe expanding from the First Causes through the stages of creation. (...) It is because he believes in the divinity of man that the divine Camillo makes his stupendous claim of being able to remember the universe by looking down upon it from above, from first causes, as though he were God. In this atmosphere, the relationship between man, the microcosm, and the world, the macrocosm, takes on a new significance. The microcosm can fully understand and fully remember the macrocosm, can hold it within his divine *mens* or memory.” Bruno Latour. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 144; Frances Yates. *Op. cit.*, p. 145-52.

Let us begin by attending to this fairly long passage from *The Pillow Book*, in which a number of aspects enumerated in the previous chapter – particularly in regards to the imagination of a central, seeing, observer – are markedly noticeable:

And now a splendid sight – a most elegant and beautiful lady, wearing a dark purple robe with a sheen muted by wear, and a brocaded formal over-robe of autumn-leaf ochre, or a thin weave, now appears, having only just risen after a night made sleepless by the clamour of the wind. She emerges a little distance from the Inner Chamber on her knees, the hair hanging about her shoulders somewhat puffed and disarrayed by the wind. She gazes with evident emotion at the garden, and reveals her fine sensibility by reciting the poem, ‘I see why the word “storm”.’ Meanwhile another, a girl of seventeen or eighteen, no longer little but not yet truly adult, stands pressed against the blind, watching enviously as a group of girls and young women works here and there in the garden to gather up the plants that have been uprooted by the wind, and prop up others. We see her from behind, an enchanting figure in badly-worn gossamer-silk shift and re-dyed, faded azure robe with over it a pale violet-grey night-robe, down the length of her back, with its prettily fluffed ends like plume grass peeping out below the robe, between the full folds of her skirted trousers.⁵⁶⁹

Shōnagon draws here a picture of a world of various onlookers in which she acts as a privileged observer. The multiplicity of ‘see-ers’ only lends her own position more gravity: the “elegant and beautiful lady (...) gazes (...) at the garden” while “a girl of seventeen or eighteen” watches with envy another group, oblivious, we presume, to her presence and gaze. But the quiet and monotonous life of the courtesan which makes her a perfect, if unhappy, observer, is joined by a number of elements which undercut the two characters’ beauty and elegance: the lady is sleepless and her hair in disarray, the girl is envious.

⁵⁶⁹ *The Pillow Book*, p. 181.

The main difference between Shōnagon and these two characters could not be clearer: their own gaze is limited (they do not acknowledge one another) and they are, despite being tucked away in the Inner Chamber, seen by Shōnagon herself. Observing the young girl “from behind,” Shōnagon positions herself as able to see everything happening at once, impeded neither by material (“pressed against the blinds”) nor emotional (“she gazes with evident emotion”) obstacles but rather with a dispassionate and near objective all-seeing-eye. Superficially, the excerpt above would seem to conform to a rather ‘perspectival’ and almost novelistic logic, with its clear articulation of distinct spaces and their relation. But Shōnagon herself does not conform to the rules of her own literary characters: her ability to see unimpeded which gives her full freedom to organise and list her world as she sees fit. Even as a first-person narrator, she seems eerily omniscient.

The negotiation and tensions of knowledge across various forms of barriers are at the heart of *The Pillow Book*’s organisational strategy, and delineating said barriers is a repeated source of concern – even if the goal is to subvert or cross them. A number of centre-periphery tensions are accordingly given expression in the text, not only due to episodes such as the one above but, once again, by the actual physical constraints of the eleventh-century Heian courtier. The world of Shōnagon is heavily felt as a world of concentric circles pushing in around her: personal duty and etiquette, the female court, the Heian Palace (divided into an Inner Palace – *Dairi* – and Greater Palace – *Daidairi*), *Heian-kyō* (modern-day Kyoto), and, finally, Japan itself as a carefully delineated and limited political and aesthetic entity. Morris and McKinney articulate well this sense of rigid concentricity: the interdictions on official relations with its foreign neighbours, China and Korea, made it so travelling abroad in a way as to permit cultural exchange was impossible. Inside the country, cultural life was centred almost exclusively around the capital and the court. On the one hand, travel was difficult given the poor conditions of communication networks while, on the other hand, and in any case, courtiers manifested just as little interest in local provincial culture to the same degree as their own refined and continental codes were so far removed from the average

person as to be incomprehensible.⁵⁷⁰ “The world of the shining prince was isolated to a degree unprecedented in the country’s recorded history,” writes Morris, with McKinney noting that “at the glowing centre of this world was the Emperor and his court.”⁵⁷¹ This state of affairs was reproduced in the palace itself, with a series of administrative buildings housing within them the smaller chambers of the Emperor and his consorts.

The world of *The Pillow Book* is marked by firm and clearly demarcated boundaries, from its outermost reaches all the way to, as Shōnagon reminds us constantly, the inner architecture of the palace grounds. But not all borders are the same. On the one hand, the inner circles are always subject to negotiation, and crossings are a permanent source of literary material: male intruders breaching the court of the Empress and bedrooms, excursions to temples, etc. On the other hand, the outermost circle of Japan is a reminder that everything that exists and can be listed is already inside – the result of an act of framing preceding Shōnagon’s text. However “small” this world “may seem from our perspective,” McKinney cautions, “it was all the world to Sei Shōnagon.”⁵⁷² With Shōnagon’s hopeful prose of reconciliation, we are firmly within the context of the list as a necessary work of curation of a site of co-habitation of very different people, things, and words. These two aspects characterise the abstract diagram of *The Pillow Book*: a firm and immutable outer limit, and a clearly delineated, but fairly porous, inner set of concentric borders. The result, in other words, is that the world and its pieces have been chosen; it is now time to organise it.

⁵⁷⁰ Ivan Morris. *Op. cit.*, pp. 97-100.

⁵⁷¹ “Official relations with China and Korea had been in a state of abeyance for almost a hundred years. Merchants and priests continued to risk the dangerous sea voyage to the continent, but other types of travel were forbidden. No ambassadors were sent abroad; nor, as a rule, were any received. (...) The slowness and discomfort of travel made people avoid expeditions from the capital (...). As a result of poor communications, the continental culture that flourished in the capital scarcely filtered into the provinces at all. Since such indigenous culture as existed in the villages was hardly designed to appeal to Prince Genji and his circle, we can well understand why the Heian city-dweller should have had little interest or knowledge regarding other parts of his country.” Ivan Morris. *Op. cit.*, p. 31, pp. 53-4. “The city in which Sei Shōnagon lived, Heian-kyō (present-day Kyoto), was usually known simply as ‘the capital’. Around and beyond, in wider Japan, lay the provinces, which for those people in Heian-kyō constituted a kind of outer darkness against which the cultured life of their capital glowed the more brightly. (...) The walled palace-grounds were in turn divided into the outer imperial palace, which held the buildings of the governmental bureaucracy, and, within another wall, the smaller inner complex of gallery-connected buildings that housed the Emperor and his various consorts.” Meredith McKinney. *Op. cit.*, p. x.

⁵⁷² *Idem.*

It is sure to bear some significance the fact that Shōnagon – undoubted master of observation – writes of her own initiation into courtly life as being marked by issues of sight. Writing about her first days, tinted by despair and shame, she recalls fearing above all being seen, describing herself as “hiding,” as “shak[ing her] sidelocks forward in an attempt to cover [her] face,” permanently anxious to be under someone’s gaze: “I, who had always hastened to draw the inner blinds and spread my fan as a shield in case my form was somehow discernible from outside, if his glance had so much as strayed in the direction of my carriage.”⁵⁷³ In such recollections, her own ability to observe is far from the insightful quality of the mature writer of *The Pillow Book*: instead of the ability to notice things around her and describe them in accurate and incisive terms, the young Shōnagon tends to compare her surroundings with “scene[s] from those tales where the storyteller gives her imagination free rein and describes it all in the most extravagant terms” and “the kind of sight I’d seen depicted in paintings but never before in reality”⁵⁷⁴ – an immature imagination largely supported by received images and ideas.

Recalling those days, she describes her own view of others in the following terms:

Beyond the pillars, a crowd of ladies was sitting packed close together round a long brazier, their Chinese jackets informally slipped back from the shoulders, and I was filled with envy to witness their easy nonchalance. I watched as they carried their messages to and fro, stood or sat, came and went, without a trace of diffidence, chatting and smiling and laughing together, and was overcome just to imagine that I might ever one day be able to mingle with them like that.⁵⁷⁵

We cannot but get the feeling that the young girl described in the “and now a splendid sight” excerpt quoted above could very well be Shōnagon herself, whose maturity allows her, now, to see everything unimpeded, to have everything at hand, whether past or present, in a prose style which is now capable of suspending the passage of time itself. The greatest biographical transformation

⁵⁷³ *The Pillow Book*, p. 171.

⁵⁷⁴ *The Pillow Book*, p. 170-1.

⁵⁷⁵ *The Pillow Book*, p. 170.

which serves also as the legitimation of her own position as an author of this very particular work is intimately related to the gained ability of positioning herself at the centre of a world which, even if conforming to a number of concentric containers, becomes, to her, entirely accessible.

If we can set aside the profound cultural differences between the two authors, the methods by which Shōnagon positions herself as standing both at the centre and apart from her world are reminiscent of the opening words of Emerson's "Circles" essay, in which he expresses the natural circularity of the world defined as a natural consequence between man as an observer and the ensuing limits of his knowledge: "The eye is the first circle; the horizon which forms it is the second."⁵⁷⁶ One strains not to think of the first sentence as leaning on the similar-sounding words *eye* and *I*. Indeed, it is in the joint work of individuality and imagination of sight that we begin to understand how Shōnagon's manipulation of her horizon depends largely on the ways by which she presents and articulates her self and her ability to see. If the horizon of *The Pillow Book* is larger than the confines of the palace it is because Shōnagon herself is larger than she seems at first sight.

This great act of circumscription which places everything inside the stable border of 'Japan' as liable to be listed is hinted at in the initial lists of *The Pillow Book*: the list of delightful things in each season (all seasons can be delightful), and the list of "times of year," which concludes with the expression "every month according to its season, the year round, is delightful."⁵⁷⁷ Cosmic events – seasons, the passing of the year – are adopted as markers for the same kind of aesthetic judgement that Shōnagon tends to personalise so much. In other similar instances, such as the assertion that "all moonlight is moving, wherever it may be,"⁵⁷⁸ the list of *The Pillow Book* and its pronouncements of what is or is not *okashi* (i.e. what belongs or not in her list) transcends – or perhaps more appropriately, merges with – Shōnagon's physical limitations. The effect is powerful:

⁵⁷⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Circles." *The Essays of Emerson*. Vol. 1. London: Arthur L. Humphreys, 1899, p. 320.

⁵⁷⁷ *The Pillow Book*, p. 3.

⁵⁷⁸ *The Pillow Book*, p. 254.

even if immobile at the centre of her world, moonlight carries Shōnagon's insights far beyond what mere physical presence could reach, shining its light on whatever thing she deems worthy.

Having articulated in such a way the stability of the outer limits of her aesthetic world and her own quasi-omniscient position, Shōnagon's prose can indulge in a myriad of creative exercises particular to the affordances of the list, beyond just restating the hierarchy of her context. This is well attested to by the fact that observing and manipulating the crossing of boundaries from one level of the circle to another is one of the most important sources of narrative tension and new literary material for *The Pillow Book*, especially where class clashes between province and capital are concerned:

Dispiriting things — (...) A letter from the provinces that arrives without any accompanying gift. You might say the same for a letter sent from inside the capital, but this would contain plenty of things you wanted to hear about and interesting news, which makes it a very fine thing to receive in fact.⁵⁷⁹

It seems that a lady who goes into the provinces as a Governor's wife is envied as having achieved the epitome of prestige by normal standards. But surely much more impressive is someone from an average family who becomes the wife of a court noble, or a court noble's daughter who becomes an Empress.⁵⁸⁰

Things that create a disturbance — (...) A number of people have gathered at a house as darkness comes on but before the lamps are lit. There's even more disturbance when the master returns from some distant place such as the provinces.⁵⁸¹

Given that the fears of total contagion espoused by Perec are, in the context of an isolated Japan, perhaps less imminent (Japanese isolationism has repeatedly been conceived as a project of national 'aseptics'), one can fully engage in playing the game of the list without worrying about its contaminating nature: it is always clear what belongs in the provinces or in the capital, and Shōnagon's reproaches make it clear that things always return to their proper place. And yet, this

⁵⁷⁹ *The Pillow Book*, p. 22.

⁵⁸⁰ *The Pillow Book*, pp. 174-5.

⁵⁸¹ *The Pillow Book*, pp. 203-4.

rigidity does not stop her from freely combining them, from taking the characters and things which make up her reality, juxtaposing them, and witnessing the “interesting,” impressive,” or “disturbing” results which ensue.

The playful nature of imagining such crossings and pitting them against each other brings to mind a number of games which were part of regular court entertainment, namely, comparison games, which, perhaps not coincidentally, might be behind the sort of lists in *The Pillow Book*:

A large category of games was known as ‘comparisons’ (*awase*). At first they had been mainly ‘comparison of things’ (*mono-awase*), such as flowers, roots, seashells, birds, and insects. (...) In Murasaki’s time ‘comparisons’ were increasingly devoted to the products of craft and art, like fans, incense, paintings, and poems. (...) Contests of this type were unlikely to produce any very fresh or original verse. They did, however, help to keep poetry in the main stream of social life and had a considerable influence (not, on the whole, a favourable one) on the development of conventional modes of writing.⁵⁸²

Morris’ observation on the lack of originality of the products of such games should be both unsurprising and suitable to describe Shōnagon’s technique of listing and circumscription: in a stable and closed universe, combinatorics can replace invention. Beyond the judgement value inherent to a difference between province and capital, the mere fact of their juxtaposition is itself interesting. Thus, the letter from the provinces should have a gift, while the letter from the capital is much more interesting solely on account of the proximity and shared understanding between sender and receiver. Similarly, the rise in rank of someone due to moving to a more distant (and challenging) post is less interesting than someone who crosses the border of class rather than geography. And yet, unlike the letter, the arrival of someone who physically moves from the province to the capital is worthy of mention and produces a deep emotional response.

The quality which all episodes share is a reluctance to ascribe literary value simply on account of distance: the rising in rank example is particularly revealing, as what Shōnagon seems to be

⁵⁸² Ivan Morris. *Op. cit.*, p. 63.

refusing is the inherently *tragic and thus interesting* condition of an almost self-sacrificial prestige. Once again, because she can freely combine everything, matters of distance are less impressive, and the lists in *The Pillow Book* engage, instead, in creative exercises of combinatorics focused on the surprising effects of putting things together, regardless of their origin.

Such crossings also signal that inclusion is a permanent possibility: her lists conform to the precept of always including what they exclude, and the limit of sight which forms the clear horizon of the excerpt quoted above, serves only to open the possibility of combining *all* which is declared as inside – the technique of delimitation as a technique of play. Her relative immobility requires such border crossings, and her ability to bring all which is inside the larger circle to the centre – to flatten all concentric circles into one, with herself as the privileged centre –, reflects the necessity of maintaining equidistance from all the elements which could figure in *The Pillow Book*.

If in the examples in the previous section, we got a sense of the latent poetic force hiding in the difference between the faint things one hears, sees, and smells beyond the confines of one's own room and the rich interior life which registers and elevates them, we see how the same dynamic is transposed into the relationship between the outer provinces and the inner capital: their value is directly tied to their being directed inwards, and the centre of this large and complex system of circles acts like a shining beacon, illuminating at will whatever it chooses and, in this way, elevating it into the aesthetically refined realm of the court. Yet, the most important centre in *The Pillow Book* is not the capital *per se*, but its reimagination by Shōnagon – the Eye/I of Emerson is once again revealed not as being at the centre of an oppressive circular horizon but rather as defining it, its size being only limited by one's inner richness.

Shōnagon's gradual articulation, through a revealing comparative autobiographical description, of a specific kind of author serves not only the particulars of her own work but, in a more general sense, the requirements of thinking the position of an observer within the diagram of the list and the technique of circumscription. *The Pillow Book* finds, in its reserved prose, a resolved

and calm demeanour towards the diagrammatic tensions of the list, the likes of which we will only meet again in *Bouvard*. In a sense, this mastery is not possible without the stability of the list of *The Pillow Book*'s outer limits, not only due to Heian Japan's isolation but also due to the historical boundaries of the possible material available to *The Pillow Book*: the defunct reign of Empress Teishi, retrospectively described. In Shōnagon's work, we have perhaps one of the clearest instances where the technique of circumscription serves the treatment of the list's items as flattened and interconvertible. Safely ensconced within a relatively stable system of ethics and aesthetics, a highly talented observer such as Shōnagon can indulge in the privilege of having her whole world at hand as well as in her palm.

Faint Lights in the Distance

In *Invisible Cities*, another immobile character pushes against the borders of his own empire. The eye forming the horizon is clear enough in *Invisible Cities*: the stationary Khan, at the *omphalos* of the world, often gazes out from Xanadu in an attempt to delineate borders, to "measure," to "survey":

"If you want to know how much darkness there is around you, you must sharpen your eyes, peering at the faint lights in the distance."

At other times, however, the Khan was seized by fits of euphoria. He would rise up on his cushions, measure with long strides the carpets spread over the paths at his feet, look out from the balustrades of the terraces to survey with dazzled eye the expanse of the palace gardens lighted by the lanterns hung from the cedars.⁵⁸³

The imagination of the terrace, from which the Khan can stare at his empire, frames an understanding of the diagram of the list in *Invisible Cities* similar to the one in *The Pillow Book*, of a palatial observer at the centre of an empire.

⁵⁸³ *Invisible Cities*, p. 51.

However, Shōnagon's development as a good observer is well matched by the Khan's "dazzled eye" as conversely myopic. Many textual clues point in this direction, such as Polo's mention of "faint lights in the distance" (if the provinces were "faint" for Shōnagon, that was due to her lack of interest, not her lack of knowledge) or even the suggestion that the Khan should improve his sight. Unlike the firm political and geographic limits of Shōnagon's Japan, the Khan's empire is defined by a sense of their dissolution: "knowing we shall soon give up any thought of knowing and understanding" its "boundless extension," territory itself is qualified, instead, by adjectives such as "endless" or, more significantly, "formless."⁵⁸⁴

This situation has a consequence which we have largely detailed in the previous chapter. In comparison with Shōnagon, whose conceptual border crossings allow her to freely manipulate everything under a worldly gaze, the Khan requires Marco Polo to physically move in order to bring the empire to the palace; to make the circumference visible to its own centre: "only in Marco Polo's accounts was Kublai Khan able to discern, through the walls and towers destined to crumble, the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing." The sharp contrast between the respective concerns of Polo and the Khan detailed in the previous chapter returns here as distinct modes of interacting with the diagram of the list as an articulation of a centre and a circumference. In comparison with Shōnagon's case, the manipulation of items which brings them closer to the centre, i.e. to inspection, does not arise out of a stable and all-knowing regard, but from a fictionalised physical movement between centre and periphery.

And yet, Polo's own shortcomings, concrete around the same lack of definition of form. In one report, for example, he alludes to the metaphor of the world as book, with the implication that a fundamental illegibility is always threatening to render the horizon of the empire – its other cities, its limit – a sign without the signified:

⁵⁸⁴ *Invisible Cities*, p. 5.

Your eye scans the streets as if they were written pages (...). However the city may really be, beneath this thick coating of signs, whatever it may contain or conceal, you leave Tamara without having discovered it. Outside, the land stretches, empty, to the horizon; the sky opens, with speeding clouds. In the shape that chance and wind give the clouds, you are already intent on recognizing figures: a sailing ship, a hand, an elephant....⁵⁸⁵

Of course, we also note that Polo's failure in this regard concerns his own inability to foreclose the limits of his own world. As a uniquely suited example of Perec's fears of contagion, the city of Venice, which stands also for everything that is outside the Khan's sphere of influence, becomes the emblem of the breakdown of this system as well as its root cause: as soon as Polo arrives, the mere fact he carries it within his memory, everything that was outside the list is now inside. Separating inside from outside becomes impossible; the city of Venice becomes a virulent or parasitic idea which leaves both ruler and ambassador anxious.

The metaphors of sight, accordingly, end up serving as apt descriptions for both characters. Despite Polo's warnings to the Khan, the inability to articulate any stable semiotic structure results in a refusal to use sight at all or worse in the notion that sight is unrelated to the seen:

Perhaps this garden exists only in the shadow of our lowered eyelids (...) each time we half-close our eyes, in the midst of the din and the throng, we are allowed to withdraw here, dressed in silk kimonos, to ponder what we are seeing and living, to draw conclusions, to contemplate from the distance. (...) Perhaps all that is left of the world is a wasteland covered with rubbish heaps, and the hanging garden of the Great Khan's palace. It is our eyelids that separate them, but *we cannot know which is inside and which outside*. (...) Perhaps the terraces of this garden overlook only the lake of our mind⁵⁸⁶

A great number of the cities which Polo describes serve as images of this difficulty of separating the inside from the outside. In *Zoe*, one of the cities described under the header of "Cities and Signs," Polo expresses the disquiet at the very "inability to distinguish" since every feature of the city could

⁵⁸⁵ *Invisible Cities*, p. 12.

⁵⁸⁶ *Invisible Cities*, pp. 93, 104. My emphasis.

stand for any other – in a rephrasing of Spufford’s question, he concludes by simply asking, “why, then, does the city exist? What line separates the inside from the outside?”⁵⁸⁷

The sense of diluting contagion is more apparent in the “Continuous Cities,” all of which, by their particular reference to professions, objects, and places outside of the historical reality of the Mongol Empire and medieval Venice (street cleaners, airports, suburbs, etc), capture particularly well the nightmare of constant and aesthetically flattening expansion which characterises middle-class suburbia. The city of Leonia, for example, does not “invade the world” with its growing mountains of trash simply because “the street cleaners of other cities were not pressing, also pushing mountains of refuse in front of themselves.”⁵⁸⁸ Arriving at Trude’s airport, the traveller might as well be arriving at the place where he came from, since this city of suburbs is just like any other city – even worse, every other city begins to resemble Trude: “‘you can resume your flight whenever you like,’ they said to me, ‘but you will arrive at another Trude, absolutely the same, detail by detail. The world is covered by a sole Trude which does not begin and does not end.’”⁵⁸⁹ The landscape which Polo sees from the window of an inn in the city of Procopia, where he stops every year, is gradually replaced by a growing sea of “flat faces,” stretching all the way to the horizon.⁵⁹⁰ The city of Cecilia is so elusive, its places so “mingled,” that the traveller who enters it arrives somewhere else the further he goes in, both ageing and getting lost in the process.⁵⁹¹ In Penthesilea, the traveller might believe he has crossed the gate and is now inside, and yet it is never clear “whether you are already in the city’s midst or still outside it.” Asking the inhabitants of this city, which is only its suburbs, where the city is, they might answer “here” just as well as “farther on.” The questions which haunt Polo’s mind, once again, turn to the inability to distinguish between the world and the self:

⁵⁸⁷ *Invisible Cities*, p. 29.

⁵⁸⁸ *Invisible Cities*, p. 103.

⁵⁸⁹ *Invisible Cities*, p. 116.

⁵⁹⁰ *Invisible Cities*, p. 131.

⁵⁹¹ *Invisible Cities*, pp. 137-8.

You have given up trying to understand whether, hidden in some sac or wrinkle of these dilapidated surroundings there exists a Penthesilea the visitor can recognize and remember, or whether Penthesilea is only the outskirts of itself. The question that now begins to gnaw at your mind is more anguished: outside Penthesilea does an outside exist? Or, no matter how far you go from the city, will you only pass from one limbo to another, never managing to leave it?⁵⁹²

This description of the expansion of suburbia which threatens to erase any sense of authenticity of cities is matched by a symmetrical invasion of Polo's childhood Venice into the descriptions of those very same cities. These two contrasting movements summarise the troubles of establishing limits in Calvino's novel and can be articulated within the context of list-making and the technique of circumscription by the notion of the orbit of the list, in-between the centrifugal and centripetal tendencies. Benjamin Sammons, who coined the terms, explains how they interact in the list:

It begins as an experiment in excess. This is marked throughout by what I have called the catalogue's centrifugal tendency. What I have called its centripetal movement, brings the poet's performance back to the here and now of his story. Moreover, this happens through a characteristic procedure, namely, the introduction of a paradigmatic dimension. (...)

The drama the catalogue enacts is ultimately the drama of the poet.⁵⁹³

What Sammons terms "poetic control of the catalogue" is precisely that which is absent from *Invisible Cities*. Both characters gradually relinquish the duties which had been associated with their respective diagrammatical positions: Polo travels and performs the work of accumulation, while the Khan should stay in the centre and serve as a stable axis which lends meaning to these new elements, and vice-versa. Without it, the technique of circumscription which manages the introduction of literary material into the list crumbles.

⁵⁹² *Invisible Cities*, pp. 141-2.

⁵⁹³ Benjamin Sammons. *The Art and Rhetoric of the Homeric Catalogue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 195, 296.

The consequence of the centrifugal tendency is to never finish the catalogue, to indulge in endless accumulation; the consequence of the centripetal tendency is to try to approximate the purity of its rubric without the items, and thus remain silent. This “drama of the catalogue” is enacted across a number of instances in which either the Khan or Polo display an inability to care for either centre or circumference, present throughout the novel – we have given only some examples.

Besides this incapacity, however, the par displays, nevertheless, an acute consciousness of the necessity of said care, particularly in the words of Polo. The nature of the problem is hinted at during Polo’s bridge parable, in which he struggles to make the Khan understand the mutual necessity of a balance between the rounded shape of the arch and each of the stones which compose it:

Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone.

“But which is the stone that supports the bridge?” Kublai Khan asks.

“The bridge is not supported by one stone or another,” Marco answers, “but by the line of the arch that they form.”

Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds: “Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me.”

Polo answers: “Without stones there is no arch.”⁵⁹⁴

Taking the arch of the bridge as an image of the orbit which comprises the list in the *Invisible Cities*, Polo’s role is, indeed, to describe it “stone by stone” – city by city. The Khan’s respective obsession with the limits of his own empire – “the line of the arch” – rehearses a deaf dialogue between the two.

The Khan’s obsession with a limit which relinquishes the identity of a centre or of its circumference is an apt image for the technique of the list as circumscription without counting or naming – it becomes inert. The nature of this obsession is evident in episodes such as the endless

⁵⁹⁴ *Invisible Cities*, p. 74.

game of chess played between the two. By imagining the techniques of delimitation which precede games and play, the Khan tries to draw a border around the objects which represent each city, hoping in this way to render his possessions readable. He spends, however, no time on the items themselves since the elaboration of the world of the list is, to him, grasped solely by virtue of its circumscription:

Ignoring the objects' variety of form, he could grasp the system of arranging one with respect to the others on the majolica floor. He thought: "If each city is like a game of chess, the day when I have learned the rules, I shall finally possess my empire, even if I shall never succeed in knowing all the cities it contains."⁵⁹⁵

Whereas the Khan "ignores" the individual identity which lends items in the list their individual distinctiveness, Polo himself is, at this point, unburdened with producing anything new, relying instead only on the hopeful effects of combinatorics:

It was useless for Marco's speeches to employ all this bric-a-brac (...) Kublai Khan no longer had to send Marco Polo on distant expeditions: he kept him playing endless games of chess. (...) It would suffice to play a game according to the rules, and to consider each successive state of the board as one of the countless forms that the system of forms assembles and destroys.⁵⁹⁶

The problem in this conception of combinatorics is that it sets aside the requirement that two things must be different enough in order to be fruitfully juxtaposed: in other words, once they ignore the qualities that each object itself ("their variety of form") any combination of them is equal to any other. Once again, Spufford's question applies perfectly.

It is hard to not see in this an indictment of the flattening effect which has taken over all the descriptions of the cities themselves. The list of *Invisible Cities* grows stale, its orbit no longer moves in successive contractions and expansions, expressed by Polo's journeys to bring objects "for the monarch's eyes." It is even difficult to articulate precisely which of the two tendencies described

⁵⁹⁵ *Invisible Cities*, p. 109.

⁵⁹⁶ *Invisible Cities*, pp. 109-10.

by Sammons has failed here: it seems that an inability to articulate a clear boundary through the technique of circumscription, the very symmetrical natures of the techniques of counting and naming have become interchangeable.

Unfortunately for the Khan, both he and Polo fail to provide a limit for the catalogue of cities – a border inside which the game of the list can be played without succumbing to Perec’s anxieties. The “formless” quality of the empire offers no guide for what is within it, and, even in the carefully circumscribed game of chess and its rules, possible cities are infinite – speech becomes “useless.” The question returns in the final episode in which Polo and Khan pour over the monarch’s cartographic collection, in what ends up being a last reference to the diagrammatical technology of the map and territorial delineation which can reveal “the form of cities.”⁵⁹⁷ Yet, once again and without this border, the world of *Invisible Cities* is in danger of consuming everything that surrounds it, including cities not yet born, cities which could only come from outside the atlas:

The catalogue of forms in endless: until every shape has found its city, new cities will continue to be born. When the forms exhaust their variety and come apart, the end of cities begins. In the last pages of the atlas there is an outpouring of networks without beginning or end, cities in the shape of Los Angeles, in the shape of Kyoto-Osaka, without shape.⁵⁹⁸

Invisible Cities begins to sketch some issues with the list with respect to the resistance and fragility of its essential components: centre, circumference, and border. Mounting tensions which result from a failure to address any of the three properly, Calvino poses a series of questions which we find fully developed in *Moby-Dick*.

⁵⁹⁷ *Invisible Cities*, p. 126.

⁵⁹⁸ *Idem*.

It is perhaps in *Moby-Dick* that we would more naturally turn to the words of Emerson – the two writers’ shared sensibility and informal inscription into the American Transcendental tradition would seem to make emerge a common predisposition towards a typical “catalogue rhetoric”⁵⁹⁹ – to find in them common grounds for understanding. We find in Melville traces of much of which also preoccupied his fellow countryman: the incongruities and harmonisation of centres and multitudes, the microcosm, the nature and literature of democracy, reflections on the metaphor of the circle⁶⁰⁰ – as Howard P. Vincent noted, “the problem of the One and the Many” is “a major theme in *Moby-Dick*.”⁶⁰¹ In effect, *Moby-Dick* can here be regarded as a laborious process of complication of the same matters which concerned Shōnagon and Calvino: how are centres and circumferences to relate to each other? What happens when one moves from one to the other? How can the compression of the limit into the centre actually take place? And more importantly, what are the dangers of flirting with either centre or circumference? These questions result, in very practical terms, in a long and difficult discussion on the possibility and nature of list-making itself, and a dramatisation of the list’s diagram which not only brings the geometric shape of the circle explicitly into play but dramatises it between three main characters: Ishmael, Ahab, and Pip.

In the opening of the novel, Ishmael presents himself as someone who believes in a complete and limited world: that “the universe is finished” and “it’s too late to make improvements now.”⁶⁰² Unlike Shōnagon, however, this delineation of boundaries leads not to creative exercises of combinatorics but to the exhaustion of all life-giving energy. Images of death recur as the world

⁵⁹⁹ Lawrence Buell. *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973, p. 166. Emerson is also the other writer analysed in Belknap’s text, together with Whitman and Thoreau.

⁶⁰⁰ A concern which runs through Melville’s *œuvre*. See his chapter in *Mardi* titled “The Center of Many Circumferences.”

⁶⁰¹ Howard P. Vincent. *The Trying Out of Moby-Dick*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1949, p. 158.

⁶⁰² *Moby-Dick*, p. 12.

becomes, – very much like Browne had written (and Melville read) – “a place, not to live, but to die in”⁶⁰³: his own body is compared to a dilapidated house, whose old walls and frail windows are poor obstacles to a deathly cold threatening from the outside.⁶⁰⁴ This is in line with the effect of the list of melancholies which opens the work, in terms which bring to mind the words of Perec: frameless, Ishmael is an undefined being, threatened to dissolve himself in a chaotic universe.

If the world is finished, Ishmael’s body, which is to say his character, is conversely dangerously poorly defined: a frail frame keeps him at the mercy of the elements and caprices of an unkind world. Even the language games and metaphors which he is known for manipulating so well, fail in their accuracy in the opening of the work. For example, he compares himself to Lazarus, deliberately equivocating between the two biblical characters: the resurrected Lazarus is the first which comes to mind (after the reference to the Spouter Inn owned by Peter *Coffin*, which we analyse below). But we quickly realise that the third reference cannot be but to the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.⁶⁰⁵ Without reading too much into it, this is certainly one of the less successful (albeit, without a doubt, deliberately so) of Ishmael’s images, and it is hard to separate this uncertainty between definite death and resurrection from the depiction of a universe depleted of clear avenues of salvation which characterises the novel’s opening.

These fearful and disquieting images commingle with an obsessive litany of “tombs,” perhaps not accidentally those sorts of containers which Peters considers exceptional since they lack the opening which renders most container technologies useful: “at first it seems definitional that containers be impermeable—watertight or airtight. But a complete seal fits only containers that are designed to be broken, such as time capsules, piñatas, eggshells, and tombs.”⁶⁰⁶ Like the universe, their sealing establishes their connection with death. Thus, the Spouter-Inn is owned by Peter *Coffin*

⁶⁰³ *Religio Medici*, p. 87.

⁶⁰⁴ *Moby-Dick*, pp. 11-2.

⁶⁰⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p. 12.

⁶⁰⁶ John Durham Peters. *Op. cit.*, p. 140.

(“rather ominous in that particular connection,”⁶⁰⁷ notes Ishmael), and the profession of the ship’s cook is ironised upon by the narrator who, inadvertently, foreshadows the ending of his journey by comparing the Pequod to the pyramids,⁶⁰⁸ i.e. a tomb. The Pequod, just for its name alone, was already a vessel of death: by the time *Moby-Dick* is written, the members of the Pequot tribe (directly referenced in the novel) had been the victims of terrible genocide, which spelt their effective end, roughly 200 years before – another ignored auspice.

The relationship between these concerns and the nature and possibility of literature itself is attested to by the “particular connection” between the name of the inn and the name of its owner – a complex wordplay between “coffin” and the double meaning of “spouter.” To spout can refer both the whale’s jet jutting forth from its head or to a derogatory description of a mode of speech which is lengthy, pompous, empty, and irrelevant (as in the political candidate who *spouts* empty promises).⁶⁰⁹ Spouting, in other words, is where speech goes to die. The question posed to a writer such as Ishmael is clear: what kind of literature will his account of the whale produce? What should be his own stance as a writer? All this considered, it is fair to say that the opening of *Moby-Dick* expresses a concern with the possibility of literature in a “finished” universe in unambiguously negative terms. Yet, two moments immediately after mark the beginning of Ishmael’s intellectual development and budding sense of hope; two moments which, not coincidentally, portray encounters with two other meanings of the term ‘frame’: from himself as being stuck within a poor house frame, to contemplating the painting *framed* in the walls of Spouter Inn, and finally the

⁶⁰⁷ *Moby-Dick*, p. 11.

⁶⁰⁸ “There is no one who will speak more respectfully, not to say reverentially, of a broiled fowl than I will. It is out of the idolatrous dotings of the old Egyptians upon broiled ibis and roasted river horse, that you see the mummies of those creatures in their huge bake-houses the pyramids.” *Moby-Dick*, pp. 6-7.

⁶⁰⁹ A connection which also brings to mind the *sēma* debate in Plato’s dialogue: “There’s a lot to say, it seems to me—and if one distorted the name a little, there would be even more. Thus some people say that the body (*sōma*) is the tomb (*sēma*) of the soul, on the grounds that it is entombed in its present life, while others say that it is correctly called ‘a sign’ (*‘sēma’*) because the soul signifies whatever it wants to signify by means of the body.” Plato. “Cratylus.” *Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997, p. 118.

description of the literal frame of the Pequod.⁶¹⁰ Up until he goes *aboard*, the whole setup of the novel constitutes, we might say, a complicated discussion on the possibilities of *borders*.⁶¹¹

As Peters observed, the sealing of the tomb means the container will be broken into. After “entering that gable-ended Spouter-Inn” (after paying a visit to this metaphorical tomb of words, that is), the initially pessimistic Ishmael considers for the first time that a framed universe might not necessarily foreclose the possibility of creating new things. Gazing and trying to get at the meaning of the oil painting hanging on the wall, Ishmael is drawn to the “long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the center of the picture over three blue, dim, perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast.” Despite this “nameless” centre, therein lies some creative, linguistic, life-force.⁶¹² Facing the undefined picture, Ishmael’s response turns into two lists accounting not for what the painting is, but for everything that its constituents suggest that it might be. In short, Ishmael first discovers that the game of endless combinatorics allows for new literary ideas to arise even inside a limited frame:

Ever and anon a bright, but, alas, deceptive idea would dart you through.—It’s the Black Sea in a midnight gale.—It’s the unnatural combat of the four primal elements.—It’s a blasted heath.—It’s a Hyperborean winter scene.—It’s the breaking-up of the ice-bound stream of Time. But at last all these fancies yielded to that one portentous something in the picture’s midst. That once found out, and all the rest were plain. But stop; does it not bear a faint resemblance to a gigantic fish? even the great leviathan himself?

In fact, the artist’s design seemed this: a final theory of my own, partly based upon the aggregated opinions of many aged persons with whom I conversed upon the subject. The picture represents a Cape-Horner in a great hurricane; the half-foundered ship weltering there with its three dismantled masts alone visible; and an exasperated whale, purposing

⁶¹⁰ And of course, last but not least, the English equivalent between body and *frame*, as when Ishmael states “I felt a shock running through my frame.” *Moby-Dick*, p. 29.

⁶¹¹ There is indeed an etymological connection between the terms board and aboard and the term border. To go aboard the ship is to go to its border; to go overboard, is to go beyond it. See, for an interesting discussion of this link in the context of his theory of the *parergon* (another pertinent understanding of the notion of frame), Jacques Derrida. *The Truth in Painting*. Chicago: The University Press of Chicago, 1987, p. 59.

⁶¹² The fact that it is yeasty is no coincidence. We return to the question of fungi in the following section.

to spring clean over the craft, is in the enormous act of impaling himself upon the three mast-heads.⁶¹³

If, at a first moment, the universe being finite (and finished) rendered it a place of cold death, the mysterious picture proposes a new model of play within bounds: being a *finished thing*, its centre of ineffable meaning (the “nameless yeast”) allows the rearrangement all of its pictorial elements into unique images and new identities. The existence of a centre of ambiguous meaning is precisely what allows the painting to forever take on new forms, “yielding” to that “portentous something.” It maintains a dynamic sense of doubt at the centre of the frame, without which “the rest” would be merely “plain.”

Crucially, it is the democratic spirit of conversation (“based upon the aggregated opinions of many aged persons with whom I conversed upon the subject”) that animates Ishmael’s discovery of a possibility for literature which marks the transition from deathly limits to creative frames. This aspect of his optimistic transition is more evident in the first description of the Pequod as a microcosmic representation of a cosmopolitan world. In the form of a long panegyric list,⁶¹⁴ it shows that the ship has not just been in all corners of the world but its wooden frame built out of that same cosmopolitan and democratic multiplicity:

take my word for it, you never saw such a rare old craft as this same rare old Pequod. (...) Long seasoned and weather-stained in the typhoons and calms of four oceans, her old hull’s complexion was darkened like a French grenadier’s, who has alike fought in Egypt and Siberia. Her venerable bows looked bearded. Her masts – cut somewhere on the coast of Japan, where her original ones were lost overboard in a gale – her masts stood stiffly up like the spines of the three old kings of Cologne. Her ancient decks were worn and wrinkled, like the pilgrim-worshipped flagstone in Canterbury Cathedral where Becket

⁶¹³ *Moby-Dick*, pp. 13-4.

⁶¹⁴ Conforming to the characteristics of the form enunciated by Curtius, namely, the presence of the ineffability *topos*. See Ernst Robert Curtius. “Inexpressibility Topoi.” *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1979, p. 159-61.

bled. But to all these old antiquities, were added new and marvelous features, pertaining to the wild business that for more than half a century she had followed.⁶¹⁵

Europe, Asia, and Africa come together in this American vessel, as do old “antiquities” and “new marvelous features.” In short, the Pequod is the symbol of American identity, as Andrew Delbanco notes: “Melville, extracted a human sample from a culture he both loved and abhorred, and he made of the Pequod a kind of Noah’s ark.”⁶¹⁶

After discovering that a mysterious centre is essential to the possibilities of creation and imagination, Ishmael’s soliloquy on the Pequod’s wooden frame underlines the corresponding significance of a firm and rich circumference to this centre. Aboard the Pequod, Ishmael has access to the whole world, and from this cosmic ship, he can forever soliloquise, having the entirety of creation at his disposal. Not only is the Pequod built out of the world, but so is its crew (compare the description above to the procession of nationalities in “Midnight, Forecastle”). The Pequod is the image of “that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The center and circumference of all democracy!”⁶¹⁷

The painting and the ship articulate two key lessons regarding listing as a technique of circumscription: the richness and diversity of the items is interdependent from an undefined centre. A stable frame and an unstable centre define the possibility of the orbit of the list. Yet, having discovered this necessary duality, the remainder of the novel might be accurately described as a drama between two unhealthy obsessions: the fixation on the centre, portrayed by Ahab, and the allure of the circumference, portrayed by Pip, resolved and mediated by Ishmael’s positioning as a balanced middle-ground.

Ahab assumes the role of emblem for an excessive obsession with the ineffable centre of the tale: Moby-Dick, the white whale. But this sentiment is also expressed in terms of Ahab’s own

⁶¹⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p. 77-8.

⁶¹⁶ Andrew Delbanco. “Introduction.” *Moby-Dick*, p. xxi.

⁶¹⁷ *Moby-Dick*, p. 126.

position as the centre of the world-ship which he commandeers. Naturally, for Ahab too the “fiery hunt” is a journey of self-discovery and self-healing (if Ishmael saw in it a release from melancholy, Ahab seeks cosmic justice for his lost limb) and for this reason, it is hardly surprising that a journey to the centre of existence should have as its destination both the whale and the captain himself. We need to go no further in this image than to attend to the captain’s description of himself as, writes David Charles Leonard, “the center of this vortical system [spinning] about on his own axis and his spinning motion [causing] the other satellites (the crew of the *Pequod*) to revolve about him,”⁶¹⁸ or, in Ahab’s words, “I thought to find one stubborn, at the least; but my one cogged circle fits into all their various wheels, and they revolve.”⁶¹⁹ Ahab’s monomania is revealed in its self-congratulatory status, turning the previously referred democratic dialogue into a hierarchical relationship of mechanical dependence. As the novel develops, it only grows graver, as Ishmael expresses, yet again, in circular terms: “For a long time, now, the circus-running sun has raced within his fiery ring, and needs no sustenance but what’s in himself. So Ahab.”⁶²⁰

Indeed, Ahab’s oppressive richness of being is often translated in terms of an unusual concentration of life within a single human, as when Ishmael writes that “from beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop.”⁶²¹ It is in order to “pierce to the ineffable center, with the overdetermined hurl of his harpoon,”⁶²² that source of concentrated and cosmic meaning, that Ahab hunts. On the other hand, his disdain for the images created around it – as Ishmael’s fantasies in front of the painting – is well evinced by the famous “pasteboard mask” speech:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the

⁶¹⁸ David Charles Leonard. “The Cartesian Vortex in *Moby-Dick*.” *American Literature* 51.1 (1979), p. 107.

⁶¹⁹ *Moby-Dick*, pp. 182-3.

⁶²⁰ *Moby-Dick*, p. 416.

⁶²¹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 509.

⁶²² Robert E. Belknap. *Op. cit.*, p. 135.

mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate;⁶²³

The visible, but poor, counterpart to the rich yet invisible; ambiguous regarding which he hates the most, it seems fair to conclude that what motivates Ahab is chiefly the fact that not knowing the nature of the "inscrutable" centre means doubting all its tangible masks. If there is nothing beyond it, so be it. In a meaningless universe, knowing is preferable even if one is devoured by the nothingness within.

The injustice perceived in this human condition subtly invalidates Ishmael's literary project which, as we have analysed before and is further attested to by the optimistic attention given to the images in the painting or the hull of the Pequod, depends largely on cataloguing *things*. He broadly subscribes to the program of the "compression of varied cultural voices in an explosive center"⁶²⁴ which, as David S. Reynolds writes, was a mainstay of the literary program of the American Renaissance. And his account of the Pequod and her crew's adventures cannot but show his ambition to become the prophet and spokesperson for such an endeavour. But Ahab's monomania renders the captain a poor representative of the democratic centre which, as in the painting in Spouter-Inn, should not succumb to a centripetal obsession but allow its power to give voice to new images.

Returning to the comparison between Ahab and the Sun, the degree to which the centripetal obsession can sustain itself without self-combusting is dubious,⁶²⁵ and it should be no surprise that

⁶²³ *Moby-Dick*, p. 178.

⁶²⁴ David S. Reynolds. *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 9.

⁶²⁵ For a more thorough exposition of the themes of self-combustion and auto-cannibalism in Ahab, see Robert Zoellner. "Green Skulls: Ahab's Entropism and Ishmael's Cyclicism." *The Salt-Sea Mastodon: A Reading of Moby-Dick*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, pp. 191-214.

Ahab's monomania acts just like the moribund star turning into a black hole, imploding in on itself simply on account of its gigantic mass. As was the case with Melville, Ishmael "could not muster Ahab's cavaliness at the possibility that 'there's naught beyond' the pasteboard mask. Unable to confront this possibility with equanimity, he faced it down in *Moby-Dick* by dramatizing it as Ahab's suspicion and by watching its effects on a psyche not quite his own."⁶²⁶ In effect, it is in the position of a privileged (because the only survivor) observer that Ishmael reprises the laudatory list-description of the Pequod returns, in the final pages of the novel, just before the ship sinks in the ocean:

They were one man, not thirty. For as the one ship that held them all; though it was put together of all contrasting things—oak, and maple, and pine wood; iron, and pitch, and hemp—yet all these ran into each other in the one concrete hull, which shot on its way, both balanced and directed by the long central keel; even so, all the individualities of the crew, this man's valor, that man's fear, guilt and guiltlessness, all varieties were welded into oneness, and were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to.⁶²⁷

Ishmael comes to understand that unchecked compression or obsession with the purity of the centre means the literal destruction of the democratic multitudinous. If the narrator of *Moby-Dick* would gather all voices into a centre as if placing them on a stage and allowing them a chance to express themselves democratically, the end of Ahab's pasteboard mask speech clarifies just how distinct his own view of speech itself is. "Speak, but speak!—Aye, aye! thy silence, then, that voices thee. (*Aside*) Something shot from my dilated nostrils, he has inhaled it in his lungs. Starbuck now is mine."⁶²⁸ Rather than attentive listening, he orders others to speak. When that fails, his own voice, prevailing, becomes just another instrument of domination by the commander at the centre. The

⁶²⁶ Andrew Delbanco. "Introduction." *Moby Dick*, pp. xxv-xxvi.

⁶²⁷ *Moby-Dick*, p. 606.

⁶²⁸ *Moby-Dick*, p. 179.

ending of *Moby-Dick* means to show that the “fatal goal” of a literature concerned with the purity of the centre is deathly silence.

Pip, on the other hand, represents the impossibility of literature not by a silence resulting from the search for the one word – the one which renders all others unnecessary – but by a similar silence due to the inability to refrain from speaking. If Ishmael’s “*circuitous* pursuit of truth”⁶²⁹ is often opposed to Ahab, the captain’s mirror-image in this struggle is not really Ishmael but Pip, to whom Ahab declares, “true art thou, lad, as the circumference to its centre.”⁶³⁰ The difference between the three is made clear in “The Doubloon” chapter which, as in a stage drama, has each character enter the scene and voice its own thoughts at the golden Spanish coin hammered to the ship’s mast by the captain. Located at the *omphalos* of the ship, the coin itself acts like a device capable of producing new centres: it itself “came from a country planted in the middle of the world.” Like the mysterious centre of the painting, the doubloon allows for the subjective interpretation of its drawings and the creation of new images, “like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn [mirroring] back his own mysterious self.”⁶³¹

If Ahab deviously placed this black hole of individuality for the crew to obsess over, Ishmael, on the other hand, immediately demonstrates a wary and prophetic understanding of what is taking place: “here’s the ship’s navel,” he says, “this doubloon here, and they are all on fire to unscrew it. But, unscrew your navel, and what’s the consequence?”⁶³² Once again, the centre is not an end in itself, but a means to the human end of literature. Pip’s response to the coin, however, is unique among the sailors. When gazing at the coin, he, in mystical fashion, becomes one with the cosmos, much to Stubb’s bafflement. He adopts a collective (we want to say, *anthropoeccentric*)

⁶²⁹ Robert E. Belknap. *Op. cit.*, p. 136.

⁶³⁰ *Moby-Dick*, p. 581.

⁶³¹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 471.

⁶³² *Moby-Dick*, p. 475.

perspective, and the lists he spouts are of someone whose individuality verges on perdition, trying to embody the cosmic dimensions of the coin itself:

“I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look.”

“Upon my soul, he’s been studying Murray’s Grammar! Improving his mind, poor fellow!

But what’s that he says now—hist!”

“I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look.”

“Why he’s getting it by heart—hist! Again.”

“I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look.”

“Well that’s funny.”

“And I, you, and he, and we, ye, and they, are all bats; and I’m a crow, especially when I stand a’top of this pine tree here. Caw! Caw! Caw! Caw! Caw! Caw! Ain’t I a crow?”⁶³³

The threat posed to literature embodied by Pip is not silence but cacophony: the thoughtless lists of grammar handbooks, the nonverbal speech of animals, etc. If Ahab’s being is compressed too tight, Pip’s is spread too thin.

The transformative moment for Pip’s character comes slightly before the doubloon episode, and much after the row between the sailors in the chapter in which Ishmael lists all their different nationalities. It is significant that it is in this moment, when the international and cosmopolitan nature of the Pequod’s crew is in full view, that Pip himself advises that the centre – the thing which binds them all together – is in danger of being forgotten: “but those chaps are worse yet (...) Here I have heard all their chat just now, and the white whale—shirr! shirr!—but spoken of only once!”⁶³⁴ The episode in question flips the harmonious nature of the democratic circumference on its head when the sailors gather around in a ring to watch two of them face off in combat. When the Old Manx Sailor exclaims “ready formed. There! The ringed horizon. In that ring Cain struck Abel. Sweet work, right work! No? Why then, God, mad’st thou the ring?”⁶³⁵ it becomes not anymore a site of “co-habitation,” to reprise Izmirlieva’s term, but of deadly violence – God made “the ring”

⁶³³ *Moby-Dick*, p. 475.

⁶³⁴ *Moby-Dick*, p. 193.

⁶³⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p. 192.

not as a worldly container of multiplicity and difference but of its reduction. The different characters enumerated in this list are not freely juxtaposable but put into contest with each other only to face off in zero-sum confrontations.⁶³⁶

Afterwards, the degradation of the centre leads to a centrifugal escape out of the orbit, dramatised in Pip's jump overboard the "The Castaway:"

In three minutes, a whole mile of shoreless ocean was between Pip and Stubb. Out from the centre of the sea, poor Pip turned his crisp, curling, black head to the sun, another lonely castaway, though the loftiest and the brightest. (...) But the awful lonesomeness is intolerable. The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?⁶³⁷

Such an "intense concentration of self" is quickly replaced by a metaphor which cannot but, in its reference to the techniques of goldsmithing, evoke the Spanish coin, as the ocean "flatly stretch[es] away, all round, to the horizon, like the gold-beater's skin hammered out to the extremest."⁶³⁸ A short biographical description of Pip in this chapter has cast him as an artist whose musical performances are capable precisely of achieving a sort of cosmic balance: when playing music and entertaining audiences, he can turn "the round horizon into one star-bellied tambourine."⁶³⁹ But what happens in "The Castaway," instead, is an unchecked concession to a centrifugal impulse, as "Pip's ringed horizon [begins] to expand around him miserably."⁶⁴⁰

If, as Emerson wrote, the eye is the first circle and the horizon the second, the expansion of Pip's horizon stands for a metaphor of unchecked sight, of having seen too much. Accordingly, "strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; (...) Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent." This metaphor is again repeated when Queequeg falls ill:

⁶³⁶ It is perhaps not too far-fetched to underline the Spanish sailor's insult which starts the fight: "big frame, small spirit!"

⁶³⁷ *Moby-Dick*, p. 453.

⁶³⁸ *Moby-Dick*, p. 452.

⁶³⁹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 451.

⁶⁴⁰ *Moby-Dick*, p. 453.

“like circles on the water, which as they grow fainter, expand; so his eyes seemed rounding and rounding, like the rings of Eternity.”⁶⁴¹ But whereas Queequeg has glimpsed something “beyond all visible horizons” and afterwards effected an uncanny return to life and its affirmation (“they asked him, then, whether to live or die was a matter of his own sovereign will and pleasure. He answered, certainly.”⁶⁴²), Pip has gone too far. As his confusing and uninterpretable dialogue in front of the doubloon shows, he may perhaps be able to speak the things which others cannot, but for all his speaking he has lost the ability to communicate: “He saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad.”⁶⁴³ Both Pip and Ahab fall under the spell of two distinct modes of the ineffable: the innumerable, in the case of Pip, and the unnameable in the case of Ahab. Further tracing the complementary aspects of silence and cacophony, it is not surprising that, together with Pip’s super-vision, Ahab’s tragedy achieves its highest point when he, conversely, turns blind: “Ahab staggered; his hand smote his forehead. ‘I grow blind; hands! Stretch out before me that I may yet grope my way. Is’t night?’”⁶⁴⁴

Neither of them offers a possibility for literature – that is, communicable and readable literature. In the context of the diagrammatical idea of the list, the presence and importance of vision are highly significant as a metaphor for the proper location of the list-maker and his *insight* – he must be able to freely circulate between centre and circumference, to navigate the centripetal and centrifugal pulls in order to achieve a fruitful orbit. In terms of the list, we might state *Moby-Dick*’s lesson in the following terms: obsession with either the rubric or the items is pointless.

Only Ishmael’s *circuitous* moderation results in *possible* literature, extracting from the two opposite poles of the anti-linguistic nature of the ineffable something that can be said and read; a report, is what *Moby-Dick*, at its simplest, is. In the words of Robert Zoellner, “Ishmael achieves a

⁶⁴¹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 520.

⁶⁴² *Moby-Dick*, p. 523.

⁶⁴³ *Moby-Dick*, p. 454.

⁶⁴⁴ *Moby-Dick*, p. 621.

brilliant fusion of cosmic activity and cosmic stasis, of the universal some thing and the universal nothing, and of the way in which matter and the void stand in a relation of reciprocal definition.”⁶⁴⁵

At the end of the novel, Ishmael presents himself as the mythological Ixion, doomed to spin forever in Tartarus on a winged fiery wheel. But this eternal spinning is not presented as a stagnant running in the same place. Like the novel itself, the orbit upon which Ishmael finds himself has no beginning and no end, the latter simply leading back to the former.

So, floating on the margin of the ensuing scene, and in full sight of it, when the half-spent suction of the sunk ship reached me, I was then, but slowly, drawn towards the closing vortex. When I reached it, it had subsided to a creamy pool. Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, like another Ixion I did revolve.⁶⁴⁶

Unlike Ahab or Pip, Ishmael does have the benefit of “full sight,” just enough to be able to articulate a report of what took place. Something that the far more sight-weary captain and cabin boy would not be able to do; each of them has, in opposite ways, seen too much to bear. Once again, where he finds the necessary safety allowing him to become a writer is neither in the centre nor in the circumference, but “on the margin.”

The Round of Knowledge

Moby-Dick, whose theme is also excess and its obsessions, comes upon a possible solution to the question of the organisation of the work of the list, of the balance between centrifugal and centripetal impulses. The orbit, however, is only a tentative solution in Melville’s text, whose narrator seems to arrive at only reluctantly, never leaving the register of the essence of the literary text as *disappointing possibility*. To begin to articulate a discourse firmly and affirmatively rooted in the orbital dynamics of the list, we turn now to Thomas Browne and his *circumloquacious* writing.

⁶⁴⁵ Robert Zoellner. *Op. cit.*, p. 203.

⁶⁴⁶ *Moby-Dick*, p. 625.

Like Melville, Browne's relationship with the image of the circle is simultaneously, as Achsah Guibbory explains, as much aesthetic "fascination" as it is a metaphor for "his conception of the epistemological process"⁶⁴⁷ – once the reader attends to not just the more explicit images and metaphors but to the etymology of Browne's carefully chosen words,⁶⁴⁸ they quickly realise that the circle is a key hieroglyph haunting the entirety of *Pseudodoxia*. Also like Melville's, Browne's work is concerned with the multitude of voices and opinions, their coexistence and, more importantly, how one is to speak and write in such a context: "what the book articulates," notes William N. West, "appraises, and finally engages with, then, are the ways people have of talking about the world."⁶⁴⁹ But if *Moby-Dick*'s narrator positions himself as a troubled seeker and representative of a democratic literary voice, Browne's approach is far more resolved, for "the people," that is, the main propagators of epidemic mistake, are declared in the opening as "Democratical enemies of truth": all are "within the line of Vulgarly" even as "their condition and fortunes may place them many spheres above the multitude."⁶⁵⁰

This spherical metaphor is neither gratuitous nor a mere allusion to pre-Copernican cosmology. For Browne, the sphere is another of a long series of circular images of the world, God, and Creation, undoubtedly indebted to the "pseudo-Hermetic definition of God as a circle whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere." The diagram of the universe, as understood by Browne, is already circular:

When He created the universe, it reflected this circular pattern—in the globe of the earth, the heavenly sphere, and the microcosm of man. Even more important, since God created man in His own image, the human mind is an infinite circle like the divine. (...) Browne conceives of the epistemological process in terms of man's attempt to fill up the infinite

⁶⁴⁷ Achsah Guibbory. "Sir Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* and the Circle of Knowledge." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 18.3 (1976), p. 486.

⁶⁴⁸ In typical Brownean fashion, the Latin roots of certain words – circumspection, circumjacent, circumscription – are emphasised in order to articulate also subtle etymological arguments.

⁶⁴⁹ William N. West. *Op. cit.*, p. 178.

⁶⁵⁰ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 31.

circle of his mind by continually enlarging the sphere of his knowledge. (...) The more he encompasses intellectually, the nearer he is to reaching the all inclusiveness of God. (...) the process of knowing is a process of inclusion, a way of containing the external world within the circumference of one's mind⁶⁵¹

The accumulative process of Browne's list technique is, then, determined by a continued process of drawing new limits around old ones.⁶⁵² More than simply a passive knowing, his is a determination to also create the conditions to interact with the listed world, to play the game of the list. In a suggestive comparison between Browne's "mobile writing"⁶⁵³ and Brownian motion, West notes that while both are characterised by "random" motion, they are amenable to probabilistic analysis, since "while no particular movement of a particle can be predicted with certainty, it is possible to determine a probable distribution of events *within a bounded space and/or time*."⁶⁵⁴ "Browne's digressions" in *Pseudodoxia*, adds West, "are allowed by his sense of the ultimate, if inarticulable, relatedness of things and their ultimate inclusion under God."⁶⁵⁵ The work of divine creation set the terms for "co-habitation," and the work of the list-maker who can freely combine all items seemingly at random depends on the stability of the limits of the universe.

Furthermore, in Browne's view, it is not only necessary to conceive of limits and borders inside of which the play of the list becomes possible, but also to invent metaphors of observation which can translate the quasi-divine omniscience in order to do so. We have briefly mentioned some of the instances in which sight is presented as a metaphor for true knowledge. This notion, however, is expanded upon, in *Religio Medici*, to touch also on the benefits of scientific implements which can aid in the activity of seeing. Referring to telescopes (the intellectual tubes) metaphorical vision is more powerful than 'mere' rational thought: "Let Intellectual Tubes give thee a glance of things,

⁶⁵¹ Achsah Guibbory. *Op. cit.*, p. 486.

⁶⁵² Again, a feature of the circular cosmos enumerated by Emerson. "Another analogy we shall now trace, that every action admits of being outdone. Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn." Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Op. cit.*, p. 320.

⁶⁵³ William N. West. *Op. cit.*, p. 173.

⁶⁵⁴ *Idem*, p. 170. My emphasis.

⁶⁵⁵ *Idem*.

which visive Organs reach not. Have a glimpse of incomprehensibles, and Thoughts of things which Thoughts but tenderly touch.”⁶⁵⁶

In other words, a diagrammatical conception of the universe and of man as an epistemological being within it prizes the imagination of sight, as Kramer explains, as the central mode of representing and explaining the processes of knowing. Besides the examples in the previous chapter, another one, on the superstition regarding the existence of centaurs, requires him to imagine their “first beholders, (...) first spectators” who having seen horse-back Thessalian riders watering their mounts mistook them for a single animal;⁶⁵⁷ seeing two things and compressing them into one. The importance of sight in Browne’s imagination betrays less a concern for readability (no less because it leads to error just as much as to fruitful knowing) than to maintain the ability to look at whatever he desires as a condition for that very same ability to read.

Thomas Browne’s chosen image for representing this ability to ‘play’ with the list is that of the microcosm. The objects chosen to represent it are, unlike the macrocosm which surrounds him, tangible and obviously limited. This allows him precisely to turn what could otherwise be a confusing and impossibly large list into a *thing*, which the scientist can manipulate:

The world that I regard is my selfe, it is the Microcosme of mine owne frame, that I cast mine eye on; for the other, I use it but like my Globe, and turne it round sometimes for my recreation.⁶⁵⁸

Bringing together playfulness (“recreation”), circularity (“globe,” “turne it round”), delimitation (“frame”), and visual perception (“regard,” “cast mine eye on”), Browne underlines that same necessity of understanding that which he believes should be available to him freely and at any moment within a strict (round) limit, granting him the ability to, turning it round, look at the world from all points of view. To repurpose Poulet’s comment on Étienne Binet’s *Essais des Merveilles de*

⁶⁵⁶ *Religio Medici*, p. 280.

⁶⁵⁷ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 32.

⁶⁵⁸ *Religio Medici*, p. 87.

Nature et des Plus Nobles Artifices (1681), and on the circle in the Baroque era, “il se satisfait simplement de l’idée qu’un univers réduit est plus *maniable*, employons son mot, plus *portatif*. (...) Il est même, dans un sens, préférable, parce qu’à sa nouvelle échelle on peut mieux le voir fonctionner.”⁶⁵⁹ Manipulable and portable: such is the definition of *Pseudodoxia* as an instance of a microcosm of human knowledge. The Baroque penchant for the microcosm humanises the pseudo-Hermetic tradition: it allows Browne to stand in the centre as well, as an observer, while simultaneously articulating his ability to have the whole of Creation quite literally at hand.

The accumulative process which allows Browne to manipulate everything, to digress, to relate any item of his list to any other rests on these principles. However, his understanding of the possibility of knowledge in a Christian cosmos is naturally tempered by the difference between the ideal of god-like omniscience and the omniscience of God Himself, which remains an unattainable model. When humanity seeks to enlarge the circles of knowledge, the Devil naturally takes part in it, for he too moves in “the subtilty of his circumvention.”⁶⁶⁰

The redrawing of the “round of Knowledge”⁶⁶¹ is thus forever tainted with human fallibility and error. Error being inevitable, the technique of delimitation promotes it just as much as it allows for a window into truth:

Thus we may perceive, how weakly our Father did Erre before the Floud, how continually and upon common discourse they fell upon Error after; it is therefore no wonder we have been erroneous ever since. And being now at greatest distance from the beginning of Error, are almost lost in its dissemination, whose waies are boundless, and confess no circumscription.⁶⁶²

In Guibbory’s words, “the tendency of a circle to expand its circumference to include external things within its boundaries is not in and of itself necessarily good.”⁶⁶³ History does not erase

⁶⁵⁹ Georges Poulet. *Op. cit.*, p. 26. My emphasis.

⁶⁶⁰ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 64.

⁶⁶¹ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 1.

⁶⁶² *Pseudodoxia*, p. 25.

⁶⁶³ Achsah Guibbory. *Op. cit.*, p. 490.

errors, nor does the mere progressive accumulation of knowledge satisfy the purpose of truth: should the Devil ever fail, he simply “fetcheth a wider circle.”⁶⁶⁴

This state of affairs naturally requires a moment of self-reflection if one wishes to engage in the process of accumulation. Browne’s solution is, like Ishmael, not to fall into any of the two extremes, ceaseless accumulation or silence. Instead, *Pseudodoxia* is built atop a conviction that an orbital movement around the subject is necessary to keep balance:

Like the great and exemplary Wheels of Heaven, we must observe two Circles: that while we are daily carried about, and whirled on by the swing and rapt of the one, we may maintain a natural and proper course, in the slow and sober wheel of the other. (...) Whereof at present we have endeavoured a long and serious *Adviso*, proposing not only a large and copious List, but from experience and reason attempting their decisions.⁶⁶⁵

Browne’s play on the synonymy of “long” and “large” shows that it is not the expansion of the list – the circle – that must be refrained. Accumulation of truths – and, inevitably, errors – is the central tenet of the work; but it must be tempered by an experience and reason that seek less to arrive at any final decisions than to “attempt” and remain within the circle of what is likely or probable.

Probability is both, writes Preston, “the most important epistemological concern of the period” and “essential (...) to our understanding of Browne’s science”; “probabilism,” she continues,

is for Browne the rhetorical position and trope which expresses both proper intellectual ambition and spiritual deference. At the same time, probabilism promotes a cabinet of ideas, a *musæum Browneanum*, in which all options are open and many explanatory paradigms are available.⁶⁶⁶

Denying any sort of Baconian optimism which would result in the work of scientific accumulation – and less infatuated than Ishmael with bombastic declarations of certainty –, the orbit is where Browne finds a place for his probabilistic discourse: even the accounts of the Authorities should not

⁶⁶⁴ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 64.

⁶⁶⁵ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 1.

⁶⁶⁶ Claire Preston. *Op. cit.*, pp. 115-6.

be “entertained without all circumspection.”⁶⁶⁷ Would the growth of the list be the sole objective, error becomes indistinguishable from truth; the elaboration of Browne’s list of truth, then, requires first and foremost, careful circumscription and, in the full sense of the word, a full “capacity for circumlocution.”⁶⁶⁸

The view of history and intellectual progress as inexorably circular and cyclical colours Browne’s circles as well: aiming less to advance anywhere than to return to an ever more cautious starting point because the search for truth and knowledge production goes hand in hand with the “fruitful recurrence of error.”⁶⁶⁹ To the Renaissance conception of history as a cycle, Browne adds the notion of balance as a fundamental aspect to the maintenance of this seemingly endless circular movement.⁶⁷⁰ This same strain runs along *Pseudodoxia*, for example, in Browne’s fascination with clocks and perpetual motion machines. Once again, just as the main subject of the entry concerns a historical inaccuracy and an underlying notion of human progress,⁶⁷¹ it digresses in the end to a musing on perpetual motion devices, “engines whose revolutions (could their substance answer the design) might out-last the exemplary mobility, and out measure time in itself”; “By Wheels,” he adds, “strange works and incredible are done.”⁶⁷²

The subtle workings of Browne’s orbital methods are fully deployed in chapters such as those concerning the loadstone (second and third of the second book). The earth’s own “Magnetical

⁶⁶⁷ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 52.

⁶⁶⁸ William N. West. *Op. cit.*, p. 169.

⁶⁶⁹ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 159.

⁶⁷⁰ “Because the glory of one State depends upon the ruine of another, there is a revolution and vicissitude of their greatnesse, which must obey the swing of that wheele, not moved by intelligences, but by the hand of God, whereby all States arise to their Zenith and verticall points, according to their predestinated periods. For the lives of not onely of men, but of Commonweales, and the whole world, run not upon a Helix that still enlargeth; but on a Circle, where, arriving to their Meridian, they decline in obscurity, and fall under the Horizon againe.” *Religio Medici*, p. 27. Compare, for instance, with Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy*: “And this is the cycle through which all states that have governed themselves pass (...). But it may well happen that in the course of its troubles, a republic ever lacking in counsel and strength becomes subject to a nearby state that is better organized; but if this were not to occur, a republic would be apt to circle about endlessly through these types of government.” Niccolò Machiavelli. *Discourses on Livy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 26.

⁶⁷¹ “The picture of Jerom usually described at his study, with a Clock hanging by (...). For Clocks or Automatous organs, whereby we now distinguish of time, have found no mention in any ancient Writers but are of late invention.” *Pseudodoxia*, p. 374. Poulet remarks how “une simple horloge d’ailleurs peut inspirer les mêmes sentiments.” Georges Poulet. *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁶⁷² *Pseudodoxia*, p. 376.

virtue” offers a fitting metaphor, for the power of attraction is precisely that which makes itself felt beyond the limits of an object – “nor is the vigour of this great body included only in its self, or circumferenced by its surface, but diffused at indeterminate distances through the aire, water, and all bodies circumjacent” – and yet keeps it intact – “he hath made the round world so sure that it cannot be moved.”⁶⁷³ Gradually, Browne enlarges his circles, and the topic moves quickly to encompass a variety of modes of magnetism and attraction: the motive for the variation of the compass needle; does garlic affect loadstones?; is the human body or vegetables magnetic?; does the tomb of Mahomet hang in the air via magnets?; and so on, all the way to “many other Magnetisms may be pretended,” or “other Discourses there might be made of the Loadstone (...) as boundless as men’s invention.”⁶⁷⁴ And yet, just as it seems that the whole breadth of creation could be related to the loadstone (now only a faint presence), he steps back, and places us squarely, after all, where we started: “The verity of these Stories we shall not further dispute, their possibility we may in some way determine.”⁶⁷⁵

Browne’s thought presents a slightly more nuanced version of Ishmael’s discovery. In *Pseudodoxia*, the dangers of the centripetal and the centrifugal are as intense as they are hushed: never presented as seductively, the whole work is directed towards the proper discourse of the balanced and cautious orbit. The possibility of the end of writing never really presents itself to Browne, as it does to Ishmael through Ahab and Pip. Instead, just as “knowledge is made by oblivion,” writing will always be anti-writing, and his *Encyclopædie* will always be fated to be also an “anti-encyclopedia.”⁶⁷⁶ The sense of disquiet which tempers the last chapter (“of some Relations whose truth we fear”) points already to another question: if the methods are clear and correct, how then should we deal with the inconsistency of all that the list deems to be inside it? To arrive here,

⁶⁷³ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 89.

⁶⁷⁴ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 116.

⁶⁷⁵ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 109.

⁶⁷⁶ William N. West. *Op. cit.*, p. 172.

we have started with the conditions necessary to have the whole world at hand, and from then the proper imagination of a central observer, the dangers of the centre and the rim, and, finally, the necessity of a balanced orbit upon which literature(s) co-habit. But what kind of literature is this? Finally, this is the problem that we, and Flaubert, confront in *Bouvard*.

Le but de tout cela

The endlessly cyclical, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* carries already the idea of orbital movement which nourishes literary production itself, which must journey between centre and circumference: not only is the end of the novel a restatement of its beginning, and the many ‘events’ of the plot merely beginnings never to be carried to their conclusions, but the structure of *Bouvard*’s France harkens back to the spirit of Shōnagon’s Japan, with its central capital and a call to abandon it in search of personal fulfilment in the periphery. Unlike Shōnagon’s world, however, and closer to Browne’s, the circularity of *Bouvard* is indeed always dynamic: “par un mouvement successivement contractif et expansif,” Poulet writes, “le milieu flaubertien apparaît comme un espace ambiant qui s’étend de la circonférence au centre et du centre à la circonférence.”⁶⁷⁷ Poulet’s analysis of Flaubert’s circular rhetoric and literary imagination more often focuses on Flaubert’s previous novel *Madame Bovary*. Much of it could nevertheless be applied to *Bouvard*, no less because at least one of Flaubert’s expressions is carried over from an early draft of *Bovary* to *Bouvard* (a span of three decades), evincing a similar tendency to juxtapose the one and the many, the individual and the world, as a circular movement from “l’objet central” to “une sorte de bonheur circonférentiel.”⁶⁷⁸

⁶⁷⁷ Georges Poulet. *Op. cit.*, p. 375.

⁶⁷⁸ *Idem*, p. 383.

Madame Bovary (draft)

Au fond des perspectives de la vie, elle aperçut le bonheur reposant dans une place merveilleuse⁶⁷⁹

Bouvard et Pécuchet

Au fond d'un horizon plus lointain chaque jour, ils apercevaient des choses à la fois confuses et merveilleuses.⁶⁸⁰

It might well be that we are before a curious coincidence. Yet, the difference between ‘perspective’ and ‘horizon’ as referring to two different “fonds” is very significant. In *Bovary*, it is the unity of the subjective thought (the perspective) of the main character which lends the novel its sense of coherence. The idea of perspective conjures a particular quality of being an observer and, as Hubert Damisch explains, carries its own diagrammatical paradigm. Perspective organises “itself around the position of a ‘subject’” which is taken as its origin, and thus we can speak of a subjective observer according to whose regard the world is organised according to “the index of what is *here*, what *there*, and what *over there*.” Crucially, perspective is spatially exclusive and requires making irreversible choices: “to each figure its place: at each point on the underlying checkerboard, if not within each of its squares, one figure and only one, among all those that are possible, can be situated.” The perspectival paradigmatic discourse, explains Damisch, concerns “the bringing together at a given point designated the ‘origin,’ of lines that measure the declension of figures, by establishing their relation to a shared horizon line, while simultaneously determining their conjugation on the plane.”⁶⁸¹ In this sense, Emma’s “place merveilleuse” is articulated also in temporal terms, since arriving there requires the moving of the observer towards the vanishing point of perspective, through each object placed carefully further and further away, in space and time. This is the time of linear narrative, of plot, of the traditional novel.

⁶⁷⁹ Gustave Flaubert. “I, chap. 9 : Goûts de luxe – Brouillons, vol. 1, folio 265v.” *Les Manuscrits de Madame Bovary: Édition Intégrale sur le Web*. <bovary.fr/folio_visu.php?mode=sequence&folio=153&org=2&zoom=50&seq=124&ppl=3>.

⁶⁸⁰ *Bouvard*, p. 204.

⁶⁸¹ Hubert Damisch. *The Origin of Perspective*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994, p. xxi.

Bouvard and Pécuchet, on the other hand, do not have a “place” but “choses,” nudging us closer to an imagination of the list (and its observer) as in Eco’s definition as a “series of objects belonging to the same context or *seen from the same point of view*.”⁶⁸² The sense of linearity which characterises the development of self and character (of a particular “perspective”) is not present in the same way: not only we are speaking of an horizon which recedes rather than becoming closer with the passage of time, but “l’objet central” which characterises this “point of view” remains, in Flaubert’s final novel, disquietingly illusory. Subjective thought, although it guides the structure of the work, is much harder to trace back to the life of a single individual’s inner life than in *Bovary*. And if in the expression “chaque jour” we might find some semblance of temporality, it is not anymore the time of the individual moving through the world towards a final goal, but of, as we will see, the repetitive circular time of a novel which introduces new things, new objects, new endeavours, always in order to never leave the same place: the subject of *Bouvard* is, in the words of Poulet, “un cycle étroit d’activité, maniaquement recommencé.”⁶⁸³ The work of circumscription renovates the objects available, increasing their number, and the sense of “same point of view” in Eco’s expression is understood not in the perspectival sense of classification according to distance but precisely the opposite: the position of the observer is capable of de-hierarchising them. But does the world of *Bouvard* change with the presence of its characters?

The space of *Bouvard* is characterised by successive movements of contraction and expansion of circles drawn around a centre, articulating a, at times, very literal account of a concentric world of centre and peripheries: the marvels of the central “capitale” – with its museums, lectures, libraries –, the periphery of countryside Chavignolles, and the foreign and exotic world which supplies the marvels converging into Paris. In this dynamic movement, things can be both exotic and familiar, easily crossing boundaries:

⁶⁸² Umberto Eco. *Op. cit.*, p. 131. My emphasis.

⁶⁸³ Georges Poulet. *Op. cit.*, p. 379

Cependant, puisque les arbres les plus rares prospèrent dans le jardins de la capitale, ils devaient réussir à Chavignolles; et Pécuchet se procura le lilas des Indes, la rose de Chine et l'eucalyptus, alors dans la primeur de sa réputation.⁶⁸⁴

Communication between centre and periphery is key, as is the transfer of knowledge and objects from the centre to the periphery. As such, the friends' adventure is conditioned by the assurance that ties to Paris will not be lost. The Parisian mentors Barberou or Dumouchel embody this connection: "le professeur lui proposa un commerce épistolaire, où il le tiendrait au courant de la littérature."⁶⁸⁵ Whenever Bouvard and Pécuchet wish to venture into a new subject to widen their horizons, it is to the centre of the cultural world, and through Dumouchel, that they will turn to in order to acquire the appropriate reading material. Conversely, the discoveries of the hinterlands also make their way to Paris. Larsonneur asks them to collect archaeological pieces ("haches en silex"), exciting their interest in Celtic history, or the friends take the initiative and, on finding the *ammonites nodosus*, Pécuchet exclaims that "nous ne pouvons faire moins que de l'offrir à Dumouchel!"⁶⁸⁶ Of course, some disinterested replies of their Paris correspondent might underline that the transfer of information and objects from centre to periphery or vice-versa is not equally judged, and different directions are, as in *The Pillow Book*, evaluated accordingly.

Still, contraction and expansion are initially framed as free exchanges between centre and circumference, neither disturbing the other. The capital is still the capital, and the countryside is mostly dominated by a sense of remoteness and provincialism. But this the state of affairs changes gradually. The opening of the novel is marked by a series of conflicts framed in spatial terms: the reason given for their flight to the countryside is presented as a lack of 'their' space – "l'espace leur manquait."⁶⁸⁷ The two friends' impulse suggests a willingness to deconstruct and replace the space around them, most notably, the Enlightenment institutions of nineteenth-century intellectual Paris

⁶⁸⁴ *Bouvard*, p. 211.

⁶⁸⁵ *Bouvard*, p. 206.

⁶⁸⁶ *Bouvard*, p. 228.

⁶⁸⁷ *Bouvard*, p. 205.

which they set out to admire. There could scarcely be any starker contrast between the prescribed paths of those “lieux de mémoire”⁶⁸⁸ and their own mode of engagement with them: “ils flânaient,” “ils passèrent avec ébahissement (...) avec plaisir (...) avec indifférence,” “ils vagabondèrent.”⁶⁸⁹ In their literal digressive ways, they unsettle the logic which subsumes the cultural discourse around them and prescribes proper modes of engagement, a conflict which extends to all forms of intellectual authority, like the professional class of their countryside acquaintances.

For all this unwitting subversion, “it would be easier to imagine that the novel’s chief target is progressive modernity,” notes Frances Ferguson, “yet Bouvard and Pécuchet’s failures could equally be seen as problems that are uniquely theirs.”⁶⁹⁰ Indeed, the ability to freely manipulate the space around them and its objects is achieved by an intense personalisation of their curiosity, which allows the two friends to wander and freely choose their subjects of study and respective modes of engagement:

En admirant un vieux meuble, ils regrettaient de n’avoir pas vécu à l’époque où il servait, bien qu’ils ignorassent absolument cette époque-là. D’après de certains noms, ils imaginaient des pays d’autant plus beaux qu’ils n’en pouvaient rien préciser. Les ouvrages dont les titres étaient pour eux inintelligibles leur semblaient contenir un mystère.⁶⁹¹

Flaubert’s description of the amateurs’ attitude could just as well be applied to the amateurs themselves: mysterious in their confused aesthetics and preferences, unintelligible, and unreadable. Knowledge seems to turn into a blank space just as education orbits around those things which one ignores, and is replaced, instead, by curiosity. That which Ishmael took pains to discover is natural for the friends: the freedom to produce new things out of the static ‘already-given’ of predetermined

⁶⁸⁸ Didier Malgor. “*Bouvard et Pécuchet*, ou la Recherche du Nom.” *Poétique* 103 (1995), p. 322.

⁶⁸⁹ *Bouvard*, pp. 204-5.

⁶⁹⁰ Frances Ferguson. “Too Much Information: Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet*.” *MLN* 125 (2010), p. 783.

⁶⁹¹ *Bouvard*, pp. 204-5.

knowledge institutions resides in maintaining a mysterious centre. The less they know about something, the more alluring its creative possibilities become.

Once again, to rephrase the argument made in the previous chapter, it is thus tempting to agree with Janell Watson's remark that, although one might wish to find in *Bouvard* some form of systematisation, "the novel provides no indication that they have any over-arching system in mind, but rather indicates that accident determines what they will study next."⁶⁹² Instead, the insistence on an ineffable curiosity should caution us against seeing in the structure of the text nothing but "accident:" the transition between subjects and interests in *Bouvard* is not so much accidental as it is inscrutable. In the words of Raphaël Baroni, curiosity superficially presented as supporting logical narrative connectors can be read as "représentation énigmatique de la situation narrative."⁶⁹³ "L'objet central" around which the text of *Bouvard* orbits is deliberately made opaque. Yet, in this way, it is easy to (seemingly "accidentally") provide the conditions for everything to be *at-hand*.

As a result of this constant inwards movement towards an intensely subjective curiosity, the compression of the outside world into the self, the world of *Bouvard* also gestures at the notion of the microcosm, more explicitly in the chemistry chapter and culminating in the episode of the museum. In the first instance, it is as if we are before the natural consequence of their modes of observation while walking around in Paris. If when they look at outside things they see merely a reflection of their own imagination, perhaps the world can be studied by reversing the object of study:

Pour savoir la chimie, ils se procurèrent le cours de Regnault et apprirent d'abord que « les corps simples sont peut-être composés ». (...) Quelle merveille que de retrouver chez les êtres vivants les mêmes substances qui composent les minéraux! Néanmoins, ils éprouaient une sorte d'humiliation à l'idée que leur individu *contenait* de phosphore

⁶⁹² Janell Watson. *Literature and Material Culture from Balzac to Proust: The Collection and Consumption of Curiosities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 88.

⁶⁹³ Raphaël Baroni. *La Tension Narrative: Suspense, Curiosité et Surprise*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007, p. 263.

comme les allumettes, de l'albumine comme les blancs d'œufs, du gaz hydrogène comme les réverbères.⁶⁹⁴

The emotional response to learning that they share something with other beings in the natural world (reminiscent of Cyrano de Bergerac's sympathy for cabbages in *Histoire comique des États et Empires de la Lune*) is contiguous with the articulation of a limit of the list in which everything is reachable and manipulable. Together with the request from Dumouchel "pour avoir un microscope"⁶⁹⁵ it suggests Chavignolles' self-sufficiency where access to the outside world is concerned. Paris gradually becomes secondary, and their house, lab, museum, and their own bodies, become new privileged centres of knowledge.

The museum episode is the definitive moment in which Bouvard and Pécuchet perform a definite inversion of the relationship between the whole world and their own domicile. The turning of the house and its objects into a mnemonic system ("ils prirent comme base mnémotechnique leur propre maison, leur domicile"⁶⁹⁶) had already continued the natural course of events following the chemistry chapter: the overlapping between the outside world and their inner selves. But it is the museum which stands for the culmination of all such efforts, for a variety of reasons.

In the first place, and despite the nature of the museum as a result of a centrifugal movement of accumulation, the centre of *Bouvard's* world compresses even further. The two friends' bedrooms become "un même appartement" at the very moment when their house "ressemblait à un Musée." The turning of the two characters into one is further emphasised and related to the ability to see properly, when Pécuchet goes to Bouvard's bedroom, once again, further contracting the centre in order to see the multiplicity of the circumference: "Pécuchet, de son lit, apercevait tout delà en enfilade, et parfois même il allait jusque dans la chambre de Bouvard, pour

⁶⁹⁴ *Bouvard*, p. 219. My emphasis.

⁶⁹⁵ *Bouvard*, p. 226.

⁶⁹⁶ *Bouvard*, p. 240.

allonger la *perspective*.”⁶⁹⁷ Again, the perspective at stake here is not the orthogonal description of Damisch, but the discovery of a central, highly privileged and highly compressed *point* of view.

Secondly, two aspects further reinforce the microcosmic aspect of the two friends’ collection: the nature of the objects collected and their arrangement in the space of the museum. Regarding the second aspect, Florence Pellegrini expresses repeated doubts regarding the museum’s structure, noting that “ni l’unité spatiale (...), ni le regard totalisant de Pécuchet(...) ne parviennent à dissimuler ‘le caractère évidemment épars de la série d’objets décrits.’” She continues:

Les principes président à la collation des objets ainsi qu’à leur agencement dans l’espace échappent au lecteur. (...) La contiguïté, la co-présence des objets serait ainsi signifiante. La problème de *Bouvard*, c’est l’impossible mise en relation des objets du musée: juxtaposés (la collection est morcelée en une multiplicité de petits paragraphes autonomes, le recours à l’asyndète est fréquent), empilés au sein d’une *énumération nivelante* les objets ne semblent répondre à aucune logique organisatrice.⁶⁹⁸

We might address Pellegrini’s issue in two different stages. Firstly, she does provide a very accurate description of the list effect in *Bouvard*’s description of the museum (even if terming it a “problem”), namely, noting both the effect of juxtaposition of a unity “morcelée” into several items, as well as the consequent effect of an ontological flattening, which she terms “énumération nivelante.”

On the one hand, as Janell Watson unequivocally demonstrates, the structure of the museum is far from lacking any kind of logic. On the contrary, not only do the three separate areas of the museum conform to an image of social order – divided into the artefacts of the Middle-Ages which interest the Comte de Faverges due to “his moral and political leanings,” the “petty-bourgeois objects” which “the unsophisticated provincial bourgeois widow Mme Bordin Admires,” and “the

⁶⁹⁷ *Bouvard*, p. 233. My emphasis.

⁶⁹⁸ Pellegrini Florence. “Espace Mode d’Emploi: l’Esthétique Tabulaire chez Flaubert et Perec.” *Institut des Textes et Manuscrits Modernes*. <item.ens.fr/articles-en-ligne/espace-mode-demploi-lesthetique-tabulaire-chez-flaubert-et-p/>. Web. Pellegrini quotes from Franc Scherewegen. “Muséum ou Croutéum? Pons, Bouvard, Pécuchet et la collection.” *Romantisme* 55 (1987).

lowest class of bibelots, (...) admired by a member of the lowest social class, the servant Marcel”⁶⁹⁹ – but their contents are not imagined out of thin air by Flaubert. Just as the books which the friends read and the ideas which they parrot, the objects in the museum are the result of Flaubert’s real life work of collecting material for his novel:

The above-cited criticism seems to assume that Flaubert chose the objects of Bouvard and Pécuchet’s museum at random. On the contrary, it is much more likely that Flaubert culled Bouvard and Pécuchet’s museum from the collections of what might be called Flaubert’s *musées reçus* (to play on the title of Flaubert’s own *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*), museums which Flaubert almost certainly visited.⁷⁰⁰

These two factors already contribute to the sense that the museum serves as an image of the real world, as filtered through the imagination and curiosity of Bouvard and Pécuchet.

On the other hand, one might still wonder, nevertheless and reprising Pellegrini’s issue, at the choice for the objects as museum pieces, even if we understand their provenance and place, as Watson herself does, when noting that “while the kitsch objects in the museum are copied (...), the idea of presenting them as museum objects (...) is pure invention.” “Why,” she asks, “are both groups of objects presented as equally worthy of display?”⁷⁰¹ In other words, why is there an effort to ‘flatten’ all objects into a “énumération nivelante”?

As we have seen, this flattening of the objects of interest of Bouvard and Pécuchet is a natural result of their mode of engagement described above: intensely and ineffably personalised, treating all objects as worthy of attention, albeit not for the reasons one might expect. But Flaubert himself can also be seen as sharing in this sensibility, for instance, for personal reasons, as when we writes to Louise Colet that “ce serait une belle chose à écrire que l’histoire d’un lit! Il y a ainsi dans chaque objet banal de merveilleuses histoires. Chaque pavé de la rue a peut-être son sublime,”⁷⁰² or

⁶⁹⁹ Janell Watson. *Op. cit.*, p. 104.

⁷⁰⁰ *Idem.*, p. 93.

⁷⁰¹ *Idem.*, p. 96.

⁷⁰² Letter to Louise Colet. 21-22 August 1864.

even evincing a willingness to elevate precisely the petty-bourgeois into an object worthy of contemplation, as he notes elsewhere:

[L]es choses les plus naturelles et les plus simples. Le mot le plus banal me tient parfois en singulière admiration. (...) À force de vouloir tout comprendre, tout me fait rêver. Il me semble pourtant que cet ébahissement-là n'est pas de la bêtise. Le bourgeois, par exemple, est pour moi quelque chose d'infini.⁷⁰³

We might even consider structural reasons particular to *Bouvard* itself, if we understand it as necessary (as analysed in the previous chapter) that the unity must be “morcelée” while each morceau remains “rien de brillant.”

More importantly, perhaps, the fact that it is precisely where both Pellegrini and Watson take some issue with the museum's structure (the “énumération nivelante” and the presentation of different objects as “equally worthy”) that the ‘logic’ of the list as a technique of circumscription takes place. Spatial unity, totalising regard, co-presence, juxtaposition – all these are the principles which sustain the conditions for “co-habitation,” in *Bouvard* explicitly framed as domiciliary. Without the flattening effect which resulted only from their (and Flaubert's) deliberate confounding of the objects presented to them, there would be no possibility at all to put such things into relation. Once again, the condition for such a gesture, is the nature of their curious character, deliberately made inscrutable.

In fact, the effect “nivelante” is both present since the very beginning of the novel but it also grounds the two friends' relation with space and the very possibility of finding a countryside home capable of sustaining the conditions for co-habitation. Of course, the space which they find lacking in the capital is never found – but this does not mean that they had been searching for any place in concrete. “Chavignoles” or “la campagne” serves less as a specific geographical indication than as stand-in for that “mot qui liait son ami à son bonheur.”⁷⁰⁴ As Francis Lacoste explains, “le cadre

⁷⁰³ Letter to Alfred Le Poittevin. 16 September 1845.

⁷⁰⁴ *Bouvard*, p. 206.

correspondant au désir de Bouvard et Pécuchet, est défini de manière très vague, voire tautologique (...) cependant, les personnages se rassurent en proclamant leur indifférence au lieu.”⁷⁰⁵ This sentiment is well expressed in the novel which, after a short geographical list detailing their spiralling outwards, gathers all places into a flat indifference:

Pour savoir où s'établir, ils passèrent en revue toutes les provinces. Le Nord était fertile mais trop froid, le Midi enchanteur par son climat, mais incommode vu les moustiques, et le Centre franchement n'avait rien de curieux. La Bretagne leur aurait convenu sans l'esprit cagot des habitants. Quant aux régions de l'Est, à cause du patois germanique, il n'y fallait pas songer. Mais il y avait d'autres pays. Qu'était-ce par exemple que le Forez, le Bugey, le Roumois? Les cartes de géographie n'en disaient rien. *Du reste, que leur maison fût dans tel endroit ou dans tel autre, l'important c'est qu'ils en auraient une.* (...) Après dix-huit mois de recherches, ils n'avaient rien trouvé. Ils firent des voyages dans tous les environs de Paris, et depuis Amiens jusqu'à Évreux, et de Fontainebleau jusqu'au Havre. Ils voulaient une campagne qui fût bien la campagne, sans tenir précisément à un site pittoresque, mais un horizon borné les attristait.⁷⁰⁶

As they move out of “la capitale, (...) jusqu'au bord de l'horizon,”⁷⁰⁷ their search for a new home becomes a literal spiralling outwards. The coincidence between the usage of horizon in geographical terms in this example, and its metaphorical meaning as ‘epistemological horizon’, clues us to a similarity concerning the attitude towards the two. Just as it is indifferent where their house is located in this ever-expanding horizon, it is equally indifferent what subject they study, as long as they have one and can study it together. These geographies – the museum's arrangement, the

⁷⁰⁵ Francis Lacoste. “Espace et Savoirs dans Bouvard et Pécuchet.” *Arts et Savoirs* 1 (2012), p. 1.

⁷⁰⁶ *Bouvard*, p. 206. My emphasis.

⁷⁰⁷ *Bouvard*, p. 207.

quest for a home in France – become diagrams for the list of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, illustrating how its centre is to relate to its horizon.⁷⁰⁸

If geographical space illustrates the diagram of the list of Bouvard, this world-consuming inter-convertibility goes beyond an “équivalence de tous les espaces,” as Lacoste notes, “au moment où les deux amis acquièrent un esprit critique leur permettent ‘de voir la bêtise et de ne plus la tolérer’, ils s’aperçoivent que cette bêtise est universelle.”⁷⁰⁹ This discovery shocks and depresses Bouvard and Pécuchet, and, perhaps inevitably, the world becomes monotonous when things become so indistinguishable from one another:

Des choses insignifiantes les attristaient: les réclames des journaux, le profil d’un bourgeois, une sottise réflexion entendue par hasard.

En songeant à ce qu’on disait dans leur village, et qu’il y avait jusqu’aux antipodes d’autres Coulon, d’autres Marescot, d’autres Foureau, ils sentaient peser sur eux comme la lourdeur de toute la terre. (...)

Bouvard et Pécuchet ne s’en souciaient. Le monde diminuait d’importance—they l’apercevaient comme dans un nuage, descendu de leur cerveau sur leurs prunelles.⁷¹⁰

The nature of their problem is, however, not the attitude of deliberate flattening which grounds their whole project, as Flaubert makes clear when adding that, in such moments, “l’horizon, était toujours le même : des champs en face, à droite l’église, à gauche un rideau de peupliers; leurs cimes se balançaient dans la brume, perpétuellement, d’un air lamentable.”⁷¹¹ Once again, leaning on the significance of the term “horizon,” the nature of the issue is never analysed in terms of the breadth of this horizon, on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion which manage the inscription of items

⁷⁰⁸ Once again, Flaubert’s writing process is transposed to the novel as he too endeavours a search for the perfect place. Crucially, he does it in the same manner as the two friends walk around Paris: “J’ai passé le mois d’août à vagabonder, car j’ai été à Dieppe, à Paris, à Saint-Gratien, dans la Brie et dans la Beauce, pour découvrir un certain passage que j’ai en tête, et que je crois avoir trouvé aux environs de Houdan”; “Enfin, je crois que j’ai trouvé la maison de Bouvard et Pécuchet à Houdan. Cependant, avant de me décider, je veux voir la route de Chartres à L’Aigle. D’après ce qu’on m’a dit, c’est peut-être mieux.” Letter to George Sand. 5 September 1873, and letter to his niece Caroline. 5 September 1873.

⁷⁰⁹ Francis Lacoste. *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁷¹⁰ *Bouvard*, p. 275.

⁷¹¹ *Bouvard*, p. 259.

in their list, nor even the fear of contagion which could threaten to grow the horizon indefinitely and not leave anything out – as Spufford notes, such a list would become meaningless.

The horizon becomes a problem only when it is “borné” or “toujours le même.” Accordingly, these melancholy days are followed and saved by new inquiries, those which comprise the largest of all “grands objets”: spirituality, theology, religion. Further inclusion of new items based on the same principles of de-hierarchisation assuages their fear of sameness. The horizon – the orbit – must simply not stop. Effectively, the end of the novel merely restates the principle of orbiting repetition: they carry on their endless journey by continuing to copy, in each round returning to the same objects. Like Shōnagon, the concern is less on whether anything new concretes around all this orbiting, but in fashioning a system that can, by virtue of self-sustenance, allow them to permanently indulge in the pleasures of each other’s company. In the end, it was never in the things they included that they had any real interest, just as the house could have been anywhere. Just as long as they are together.

As they gaze at the night sky, it is this movement of detached cosmic embrace which Flaubert captures so well in two laconic paragraphs:

— Quel est le but de tout cela?

— Peut-être qu’il n’y a pas de but.

— Cependant...

Et Pécuchet répéta deux ou trois fois « cependant », sans trouver rien de plus à dire.

(...)

La majesté de la création leur causa un ébahissement infini comme elle.

Leur tête s’élargissait. Ils étaient fiers de réfléchir sur de si grands objets.⁷¹²

It is almost tempting to read literally the remark that their heads grow in an attempt to encompass everything within their own doubled selves. In *Bouvard*, the logic of inclusion and exclusions is carefully hidden from view, and the whole world is liberally at hand for the two dilettantes. In sharp

⁷¹² *Bouvard*, p. 226.

contrast with the remainder of the texts, there are no efforts to clarify or disentangle centre and circumference, to temper centripetal or centrifugal tendencies. In *Bouvard*, everything orbits in the air; anything can be conjured at any moment; nothing is out of bounds.

III. Listing as Naming

First Murderer: We are men, my liege.

Macbeth: Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men;

As hounds and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs,

Shoughs, water-rugs and demi-wolves, are clept

All by the name of dogs...

— *Macbeth*

The previous analysis of the list as a technique of counting showcased distinct ways by which items are added to a list. Additionally, we briefly touched on the interplay between new and old items – how the inclusion of new things comes to affect and be affected by a preexisting totality. This was partially inevitable, as our reflections always departed from the informed postulation of a clear ‘goal’ implicit in the elaboration of the list, whether political, rhetorical, or literary.

This chapter takes a closer look at what lies behind not the inclusion of new things but behind the internal dynamics which allow new items to become an integral part of the list, to coalesce together into a meaningful whole. We look carefully at the rubric, not as mere intentional premise, but itself as the object of technique: the technique of naming.⁷¹³

The Name as Taboo

In Vismann’s article, the technique of naming is imbued with a sense of negativity to which is added the burden of the necessity of effective communication. The “act of naming” is a cultural technique particularly associated with the antithesis of culture, for in allowing “things to be used and studied in the first place,” naming is also the crucial technique which allows culture to conceive

⁷¹³ The notion of naming in the list could also refer to another kind of enumerative technique: the panegyric. The panegyric could have comprised another section in the chapter dedicated to the techniques of counting. In this chapter, however, naming refers instead to a basic technique of listing, and not to the particular techniques of the panegyric.

of a “world where techniques do not exist at all.”⁷¹⁴ Naming points to a world outside of technique or, in terms closer to our analysis, ultimately always outside of the literary which serves as our only means of locating and referring to it. Other accounts, such as the mystical, also ground the ambiguity of the name as referring to that which is beyond language – here the idea of ‘effectiveness’ is supplemented by that of ‘safety,’⁷¹⁵ which we have often gleaned behind the stated motives of Polo, Browne, Shōnagon, or Flaubert.

On the seemingly opposite side of this issue – and closer to the spirit of the list – are descriptions such as Eco’s: stressing the necessities of practical and clear communication, Eco distinguishes between “definitions by essence” – something analogous to the name – and definitions “by lists of properties,” noting that the latter is more common. “This is why,” he explains, “lists that define something through a non-finite series of properties, even though apparently vertiginous, seem to be closer to the way by which in everyday life (and not in science departments) we define and recognize things.”⁷¹⁶ If true names, or “descriptions by essence,” are not practical enough for everyday discourse, one might instead furnish a list of items in relation to which that very same essential definition becomes a rubric.⁷¹⁷ The elaboration of such “non-finite lists of properties” falls under the techniques of counting: enumeration, accumulation, addition, etc.

Vismann and Eco’s propositions are closer than they appear at first sight, falling somewhat in line with Blumenberg’s account of the rivalry between naming and reproduction:

Il existe une profonde rivalité entre la théorie qui vise l’idéal de la reproduction et celle qui poursuit l’idéal du nom. Car le nom d’une chose est précisément ce qui ne se livre pas

⁷¹⁴ Cornelia Vismann. *Op. cit.*, p. 89.

⁷¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben offers a clear description of this issue, namely, of the name as concerning precisely that in-between (“fracture”) where the *mediation* of technique also lays and the threat it poses to language: “For whoever meditates on the unsayable, it is an instructive observation that what one cannot speak of, language can perfectly name. (...) According to this idea, the unsayable is not that which is in no way attested to in language, but that which, in language can only be named. (...) The ancient wisdom that, under the name of mysticism, keeps watch against the level of the name being made to coincide with that of the proposition takes its stand on this fracture of language.” Giorgio Agamben. *The Idea of Prose*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 105.

⁷¹⁶ Umberto Eco. *Op. cit.*, pp. 217-21.

⁷¹⁷ The learning or teaching of a new word, might provide a common occurrence of this practice. If an interlocutor does not know the word “dog,” for example, one might effectively communicate its meaning via a list such as “it has four legs, it’s ‘man’s best friend,’ it likes bones, etc.”

dans son image ou dans la somme de ses images, et qui donne à celui qui le connaît l'emprise même sur ce qui ne peut être représenté.⁷¹⁸

The list, however, more often than not serves as a stage for the development of this “rivalry” and its tensions less than as a proof of argument for either of them. For if the ideal name is indeed regarded as the proper (and properly minimal) account of that which is unsayable, it is equally true, as Blumenberg observes, that it escapes proper representation. We might say that the rubric is imperfectly accounted for by the items it calls to generate, which in turn address a representational crisis of an onomastic nature but are limited by, as Eco notes, the finitude of the list itself.⁷¹⁹

One example is the doctrine of the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite and the problem of the names of God and their listing. It states (to simplify) that any knowledge related to God and its names can only be expressed by negative (or assumedly deficient) statements.⁷²⁰ As such, despite any lists related to the names of God appearing as ‘normal’ lists, its items should be understood as being prefaced by an invisible “neither” and then a series of “nor.” Each item is *a* name, conforming perfectly well to the rubric of “names of God” since each of them carries enough relevance to warrant inclusion. However, none is the true name, which evades inclusion as item but exists only as the invisible underbelly of the far greater rubric: as William James writes, “these qualifications are denied by Dionysius, not because the truth falls short of them, but because it so infinitely excels them.”⁷²¹ One should take note that the listing of names is not necessarily negative in itself – to every furious invective of Captain Haddock, there is a “You’re the Top” by Cole Porter.

⁷¹⁸ Hans Blumenberg. *La Lisibilité du Monde*. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2007, p. 95.

⁷¹⁹ For a literary example, we would be pressed to find a clearer one than in Nabokov’s *Lolita*: “There are two kinds of visual memory: one when you skillfully recreate an image in the laboratory of your mind, with your eyes open (and then I see Annabel in such general terms as: “honey-colored skin,” “think arms,” “brown bobbed hair,” “long lashes,” “big bright mouth”); and the other when you instantly evoke, with shut eyes, on the dark inner side of your eyelids, the objective, absolutely optical replica of a beloved face, a little ghost in natural colors (and this is how I see Lolita).” Vladimir Nabokov. *Lolita*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1955, p. 13.

⁷²⁰ Such ideas are not exclusive to Christian religion: the practice of *neti-neti*, described in the *Upanishads*, rests precisely on the gradual negation of everything, in order to arrive at what is Brahman.

⁷²¹ William James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2002, pp. 416-7.

Yet, both cases are motivated by the same onomastic intuition: just as there is no perfect insult, there is no perfect adulatory term for a loved one. Listing as naming is to compromise.

From here follow two important considerations. The first is that naming creates dark regions of unsayability. Naming the rubric by listing its items foregrounds the unsayable at its heart. And recognising the difference between the items which justify their inclusion as different foregrounds the empty space in-between them, which only the presence or imagination of the rubric can explain. Although we have not used this formulation before, we might as well identify all those unsayables described earlier (utopias, friendship, melancholy and wonder, etc.) as pertaining to the general category of the *taboo*. In this sense, Edmund Leach's unique account of the taboo accurately describes its emergence from processes of accumulative naming, while his notion of "continuum" which "uninhibited" or "untrained" perception can recognise expresses the same idea of a lost or impossible world mentioned by Vismann,⁷²² the world prior to technique:

We are taught that the world consists of 'things' distinguished by names; therefore we have to train our perception to recognize a discontinuous environment. We achieve this second kind of trained perception by means of a simultaneous use of language and taboo. Language gives us the names to distinguish the things; taboo inhibits the recognition of those parts of the continuum which separate the things.⁷²³

This negation, however, never implies total absence: Valentina Izmirlieva describes lists as the "perfect rhetorical equivalent to Dionysius's theory of divine names," precisely because "stubbornly ignoring everything that makes its members different, a list is fixed upon the one thing that makes them alike."⁷²⁴ Thus, the second consideration concerns the nature of each of the items as fundamentally 'the same', despite their differences, due to their simultaneous addressing to the

⁷²² "The term 'cultural techniques' suggests there may be other kinds of techniques as well. But can anything ever be produced outside of culture? (...) The opposite of cultural techniques are not culture-less techniques. There is no such thing as barbarian techniques." Cornelia Vismann. *Op. cit.*, pp. 88-9.

⁷²³ Edmund Leach. "Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse." *Anthrozoös* 2.3 (1989), p. 155.

⁷²⁴ Valentina Izmirlieva. *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

rubric. It is in this spirit that Sève defines the list, at one point, by subverting their appearance of multiplicity. “La liste,” he writes, “joue sur les idées de variété ou de variation ; mais c’est une variété faible, qui se renverse en répétition du même.”⁷²⁵ Underlining less the accumulative difference (counting) or agglutinative frame (circumscribing) rather than a sense that it all returns to a repeated emphasis on a common something, this “weak variety” or “repetition of the same” refers to the rubric. As Massin observes, however, variation and repetition are not opposites but co-dependants: “la variation est indissociable de l’improvisation,” he writes “cette dernière répondant elle-même à la loi, à la nécessité de la répétition (...). C’est la répétition qui permet la reconnaissance.” He concludes by shrewdly observing that “la répétition est à la fois imitation et variation.”⁷²⁶ To a degree, the variation by which an item states something else about the rubric which the previous items have not stated before, must not be so drastic as to not allow the moment of “recognition” by which we understand the shared connection between the two items and the rubric.

Bringing these two questions together – and in an interesting parallel – Barney notes that Chaucer often resorted to two distinct terms for giving a list: *undo* or *reherce* (rehearse),⁷²⁷ two terms which emphasise the repetitive nature of the attempts at naming (rehearsing), or the degradation of the rubric evident in such failed attempts (undoing). Similarly, each of the two considerations can be seen to respond to the accounts of the issues of the name as a self-sufficient representation of the rubric according to the distinct views of Eco or Vismann: the technique of listing as a *technique of naming its rubric* navigates the tension between the production of regions of taboo and the repeated attempts at providing what are inevitable incomplete and partial representations of the most tabooed region of all; between undoing and rehearsal. For a list to be complete, in this sense, it would have to be infinite, since new items would always have to arrive to

⁷²⁵ Bernard Sève. *Op. cit.*, p. 58.

⁷²⁶ Massin. *Op. Cit.*, p. 60.

⁷²⁷ Stephen A. Barney. *Op. cit.*, p. 191.

supplement the emergent taboos of the interstitial space between named items. Inasmuch as all rubrics can be understood in the form of “a list of x ,” the rubric itself possesses a double-identity: between something solid – the true name – and something which is already *becoming* the items, which now turn into weak (possible) repetitions. For our purposes, let us say that to list is to (almost) name the rubric, over and over again.

It is also inevitable that the question of the negative surrounding the list and its relation with its rubric should raise a number of moral objections, particularly if framed as the duty of literature or of the list-maker – as in what is implied in Jules Renard assertion “je n’ai plus besoin de décrire une arbre : il me suffit d’écrire son nom.”⁷²⁸ Where naming becomes morally charged, is where, as Renard intimates and Judith Schlanger writes, the ethics and aesthetics of brevity result in the effort to replace description with nomenclature⁷²⁹ (which Sève calls “l’état pur de la liste”⁷³⁰), stressing the writer’s duty of not threading upon the linguistic degradation of their subject or the pointlessness of producing (unliterary) repetitions.

This layered morality of naming is widespread in literary lists in general but also in our *corpus*. It usually configures a statement opposite to Renard’s, while tacitly recognising the *hybristic* nature of the naming gesture: it is the ineffability *topos* and its often apologetic tone, which makes a claim on what is not enough and yet must (for now) be. Its apologetic dimension underlines the negative aspect of elaborating upon the list, as it posits language as being fundamentally “disappointing” in its ability to express what it really wants to (or should) express.

We will now devote some attention to each of the texts, in order to consider their relationship with their rubrics, the specific dynamics by which items arrive to answer its call, and the reservations and anxieties posed by the problem of naming. Departing from the elements gathered in this introduction, we expand the analysis, in each sub-section, to other issues related to the

⁷²⁸ Jules Renard *apud* Judith Schlanger. *Op. cit.*, p. 112.

⁷²⁹ Judith Schlanger. *Op. cit.*, p. 112.

⁷³⁰ Bernard Sève. *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

technique of naming in the list. In this way, for each text its analysis foregrounds a particular aspect of the discussion around the technique of naming and the title of each sub-section follows a descriptive logic: the first term being our proposal for the rubric of each work, and the second underlining a feature which will weigh heavily on their respective analysis.

In view of a brief itinerary, we begin with Sei Shōnagon and the notion of *okashi*, analysing how the inscribing of items under such a rubric is modelled on the dialogue between the aesthetics of *attention* and *sprezzatura*. Following the thread of attention as intrinsic to naming, we consider its role in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*'s depiction of friendship, and how the personal-public dichotomy present in *The Pillow Book* changes in a text dedicated to the evolution and formation of two distinct individuals. In this light, we then consider the various avatars of *otherness* in *Moby-Dick*, from its use of hieroglyphs, to metaphors of fungal decay, and the image of the "phantom," reading Melville's text as a quest for and a list of *the true other*. From death to life in *Pseudodoxia*, we analyse how Browne's complex understanding of the science of biological generation provided a model for his views on both the generation of truth and the structure of the text itself – even if affected by various 'others' which haunt it (the ancients, the public, God, Satan), *Pseudodoxia* has for rubric something even more abstract than Shōnagon's *okashi*: Truth. Finally, in *Invisible Cities*, we see how categories carefully crafted in other texts are shattered by the same gesture that they were built on: self and other collapse, taboos are shown front and centre, in what is, in the end, yet another attempt at displaying a rubric which must remain hidden.

Okashi and Attention

More than in any other work, *The Pillow Book* is enmeshed with a complex system of taboos rooted in Shintoist practice which, writes Morris, "had a considerable effect on [the aristocracy's]

daily life”⁷³¹ and often shapes the narrative episodes of *The Pillow Book*.⁷³² As discussed in the previous section, the greatest taboo of all is the rubric of Shōnagon’s list: the *okashi* aesthetic as perfectly encapsulated by Teishi’s ruined court. McKinney confirms the overbearing presence of *okashi* as the rubric which she calls “the unifying theme behind her jumble of apparent random jottings,” further noting the complex relationship between the rubric and its reflection upon the items – how even when it is absent, it is present, because they have been inscribed in light of and due to the rubric:

there certainly would have been no talk of ‘an *okashi* aesthetic’ at the court. Yet she clearly was intent on documenting her world through its lens. Even when the word itself is absent from what she writes, we feel its presence as the constant tenor, as much in her discussion of what fails to delight as in the record of what does.⁷³³

In the previous section, we understood Shōnagon’s digressive textual strategies as answering to what we now describe as the taboo-like political quality of *okashi*-as-rubric. Yet, if the digression which adds another item to the list is part of the practice of accumulation, the fact that it also leaves the thing it digresses from in an unfinished state is also related to the technique of naming as pertaining to *a practice of elimination*. This double-bind comprises the centripetal tendency opposed to the centrifugal escape – the orbit of the list. The question of the ‘minimum’ of the list becomes particularly acute in Shōnagon’s text, especially when put into dialogue with its various

⁷³¹ Ivan Morris. *Op. cit.*, p. 107. To describe this system would yield a longer footnote than what would be sensible. We quote some passages from Morris’ text, in order to display some of its richness as well as the extent of its importance in Shōnagon’s life: “An interesting case of cultural blending is to be found in the idea of directional taboos (...). First was the permanently and universally unlucky direction, the north-east. (...) The second type was permanently unlucky during specific periods of one’s life; at the age of sixteen, for instance, one might (depending on one’s sex, the time of one’s birth, and other particulars) have to avoid the northwest. The final and most frequent type was universally but temporarily unlucky and was based on the position of certain divinities.” Morris further notes that “during the civil wars warriors were often guided by directional taboos and divination when choosing the place and time of battles.” Finally, “as if these restrictions were not sufficiently onerous, there was a mass of additional taboos derived from miscellaneous sources. Fingernails, for instance, could be cut only on the Day of the Ox and toenails on the Day of the Tiger. Bathing, at best a rather perfunctory process, could take place only once in five days – and then only if the day was auspicious.” See Ivan Morris. *Op. cit.*, pp. 103-8, 136-40; also Bernard Frank. *Kata-imi et kata-tagae: Étude sur les Interdits de Direction à l’Époque Heian*. Paris: Collège de France—Institute des Hautes Études Japonaises, 1998.

⁷³² For example: “The next day, there was a letter from Secretary Captain Tadanobu. ‘I made a pilgrimage to Kurama last night,’ it read, ‘but owing to a directional taboo this evening, I’m returning by a different route.’” *The Pillow Book*, p. 70.

⁷³³ Meredith McKinney. *Op. cit.*, pp. xxii-xxiii.

taboos. Besides the taboo of Shōnagon's rubric and the danger it posed, *The Pillow Book* and its setting greatly emphasise an aesthetic of the minimum, the succinct, or the laconic, all expressed in terms of good literature and good social practices. Before analysing *The Pillow Book* in such terms, it is impossible to avoid discussing it in the context of the theoretical and practical minimums of the list which the nature of this text – with its sharp and laconic observations – often seems to call for. Thus, what are the minimum requirements for the production and identification of a list?

It is notable that what seems to be a majority of works consider the list as starting at three.⁷³⁴ Without much justification, David Matz's *Ancient World Lists and Numbers*,⁷³⁵ for example, starts at three, implying that anything smaller was not recognised as a list by the author. Departing from one of the lists in *The Pillow Book*, Sève, on the other hand, holds the view that the minimum of the list can go as low as one: "on serait tenté de répondre « deux »,” he observes, “mais on peut très bien concevoir une liste ne comportant qu'un item, à condition que le lecteur ait conscience qu'il s'agit d'une liste.”⁷³⁶ The explicit rubric constitutes, for Sève, the crucial condition allowing for this *recognition*. And he refers precisely to Shōnagon's 'list' of "kinds of moon," a 'one-item' list, to illustrate his point: "*Kinds of moon* – The dawn moon, rising thin over the rim of the eastern mountains, is very moving.”⁷³⁷

We should exclude lists with zero items, Sève seems to suggest, even if that context which allows a list to be recognised as such should be present. Still, the fact that the rubric of the 'kinds of moon' list points to a plurality of items – even if the 'list' itself contains only one – should give us pause. After all, the element which, to paraphrase Sève, gives rise to the consciousness that one is before a list, is doing nothing short of underlining a lack in the object in question: there are other moons, not included in the list, but present in their absence due to the rubric's formulation. It would

⁷³⁴ The assertion is hard to prove because, as in Matz's example, most works dedicated to lists do not define a list on these terms. None of them, however, have any lists below three items.

⁷³⁵ David Matz. *Ancient World Lists and Numbers: Numerical Phrases and Rosters in the Greco-Roman Civilizations*. Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland, 1995.

⁷³⁶ Bernard Sève. *Op. cit.*, p. 33. My emphasis.

⁷³⁷ *The Pillow Book*, p. 203.

seem a rash step to consider the object itself as a suitable representative of its class – in other words, why exclude zero-item lists at all if the single kind of moon listed simply points to the absence of other kinds? We could argue that a zero-item list of “kinds of moon,” if it makes the rubric explicit, is already beginning to interact with two of the three techniques of listing, naming and circumscribing, with the technique of counting being, perhaps, left up to the reader.

Other examples in Shōnagon’s text showcase the remainder of possible permutations: one or two-item ‘lists,’ with and without explicit rubric:

[65] *Poetic anthologies* — The *Manyōshū*. The *Kokinshū*.

[199] *Darani incantations* are best when performed at daybreak. Sutras are best at twilight.

[200] *Musical performances* are best at night, when you can’t see people’s faces.⁷³⁸

“Poetic anthologies” presents us with seemingly few issues. Yet, “darani incantations” and “sutras” do not a list make, perhaps because, as Sève rightly points out, “couples systématiques fermés”⁷³⁹ tend to be received as something else entirely. “Musical performances” is rather curious, since the modern edition italicises a possible rubric – yet, “darani incantations,” is decidedly *not* the rubric of the second example. In any case, and despite the editorialising, “musical performances” reads just like a statement or a judgement of taste, one of many scattered throughout *The Pillow Book* – but not like a list.

Questions of the minimum of the list and its relationship with the rubric – and its functions – are particularly important in a work such as *The Pillow Book*, which relies so heavily on what is not spoken as much as on what is. The universe of taboo-like practices central to the life of the Heian court goes hand-in-hand with the aesthetic of the succinct, the laconic, the pure; in short, the aristocratic elegance of the minimum and the understated (“commoners,” writes Shōnagon, “always

⁷³⁸ *The Pillow Book*, pp. 59, 185.

⁷³⁹ “Par couples systématiques fermés, j’entends les couples formés de deux éléments solidaires et inséparables, que ces éléments soient complémentaires ou contradictoires, et qu’ils relèvent de la technique (anode et cathode), de la mythologie (Charybde et Scylla), de la logique (analyse et synthèse), de la littérature (Roméo et Juliette), etc.” Bernard Sève. *Op. cit.*, pp. 34-5.

use too many words when they speak”⁷⁴⁰) which in the West was encapsulated in Baldassare Castiglione’s *sprezzatura*. *Sprezzatura* is indeed a very accurate description of the demeanour of the ideal Heian courtier’s *negligentia diligens*, especially as Schlanger describes it: “sa simplicité n’est pas celle du moindre ou d l’inachevé. C’est tout le contraire d’un geste d’apprenti. (...) Il n’y a rien à ôter à l’épure de la forme, mais il n’y a rien non plus à ajouter.”⁷⁴¹

The effect of “careful negligence” of the courtier requires mutual understanding and recognition, for it relies on the ability of others to see, beyond the superficially small, the real depth of each gesture. As Morris writes,

[t]he conversation and letters of the aristocracy are larded with teasing innuendoes, artful references to past incidents, and cunningly devised nicknames, which would be meaningless to anyone outside their circle, but which evoke an immediate response among the ‘courtly herd’.⁷⁴²

Such rules of etiquette and aristocratic social games are in permanent relation to a kind of social taboo: saying one thing while implying another which would be in bad taste to make explicit. For these reasons, one must consider two key elements of Shōnagon’s aesthetic experience and expression, comprising her roles as writer and reader of social interactions: artful succinctness and passive *attention*.

To quote Bogost once more, lists “can do the philosophical work of drawing our attention toward them with greater attentiveness,”⁷⁴³ which is to say that lists invite us to relate to their contents in the form of attentiveness, but also that lists do something to attention, enhancing it or perhaps simply emulating it (an aspect related to Contzen’s account of their dimension of “experientiality”) which, in the reading process, might be the same thing. Sei Shōnagon, however,

⁷⁴⁰ *The Pillow Book*, p. 7.

⁷⁴¹ Judith Schlanger. *Op. cit.*, pp. 11-2.

⁷⁴² Ivan Morris. *Op. cit.*, p. 181.

⁷⁴³ Ian Bogost. *Op. cit.*, p. 45.

has a unique relationship with attention: to follow the etymological clue,⁷⁴⁴ she is an *attendant*, someone whose job is to pay attention or, as in French, *attendre*, to wait, namely, for things to reveal themselves. Even in the accounts of her fellow courtiers, Shōnagon is a master of attention: “who else,” they ask after she relates her encounter with Secretary Captain Tadanobu, “took in such detail, down to the very threads and stitches?”⁷⁴⁵

For the Heian courtier, attention might be the most important behavioural mode of all for her job requires her to be constantly paying attention: to the movements in the Palace, to the subtle moods of visitors and Empress, to the general ambience of the other courtiers, to etiquette, small signals and clues from others, etc. Etiquette, in particular, is a strange category which underlines the importance of attending to situations and others and reacting accordingly. While much of it rests on strict regulations (which can, over time, come to be performed without much thought being allocated to them), an equal amount requires precisely what Massin calls improvisation: we think here of the many repartees which required Shōnagon’s quick wit, knowledge of social and literary convention, and, more importantly, ability to reduce all this to artful *sprezzatura*:

I looked at the letter, and found it to be written very beautifully, on this blue paper. There was nothing in it to justify my nervousness. He had written the line from Bo Juyi, ‘You are there in the flowering capital, beneath the Council Chamber’s brocade curtains’, and added, ‘How should it end, tell me?’ (...)

I barely had time to turn the problem in my mind before the messenger was distracting me again with his urgings to be quick, so I seized a piece of dead charcoal from the brazier and simply wrote at the end of his letter, in Japanese script,

⁷⁴⁴ I owe this clue to Justin E. H. Smith’s book. See Justin E. H. Smith. *The Internet Is Not What You Think It Is: a History, a Philosophy, a Warning*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. eBook.

⁷⁴⁵ *The Pillow Book*, p. 72.

Who will come visiting this grass-thatched hut?⁷⁴⁶

Sprezzatura has by definition no rules: those who have it are often described as possessing the allure of the French *je ne sais quoi* – not by coincidence a trait expressed in *negative* terms. Moreover, the register of items in *The Pillow Book* follows, once again, a logic that is both personal and public. Like *sprezzatura* itself, its text must navigate the tightrope of public expectations and personal spontaneity, repetition and improvisation.

Turning small and trivial gestures, signs, or objects into carriers of profound meaning, in the world of *The Pillow Book*, small changes grant objects the ability to become *things*, that is, to demand attention and convey meaning. This is the case, for example, of the “half-panel shutter” that Shōnagon discretely leaves raised when she goes into a room, in order to signal to her incoming visitor that he should meet her there and not somewhere else.⁷⁴⁷ The *sprezzatura*-effect of leaving the half-panel shutter open lies in the ability to perform the minimum required action to convey precise and deep (and also sexual) meaning, as well as being attuned to such small and, to the uninitiated, trivial objects and gestures which can be understood as meaningful by others.

The Pillow Book often goes further, since such changes and expressions of meaning can bypass inter-human communication, suggesting a kind of affective autonomy of the things of the world, clear in episodes such as “Things that make your heart beat fast”: “on a night when you’re waiting for someone to come,” she writes, “there’s a sudden gust of rain and something rattles in the wind, making your heart suddenly beat faster.”⁷⁴⁸ Despite her anxiety being due to the waiting for

⁷⁴⁶ *The Pillow Book*, p. 67. McKinney’s explanation is well worth transcribing in order to understand the poetic and aristocratic talents of Shōnagon: “From ‘Alone at Night in a Grass-thatched Hut beneath Lu Shan Mountain’, sent to a friend in the capital: ‘You are there in the flowering capital, beneath the Council Chamber’s brocade curtains / while I sit on a rainy night in my grass-thatched hut beneath Lu Shan Mountain.’ Sei knows the poem, but her dilemma is that it would be unladylike to respond in Chinese. Furthermore, simply to supply the next line would be a poor response. Her solution is to turn the second line of Bo’s poem to her own purposes by creating the final two lines of a new poem in Japanese that alludes to Tadanobu’s failure to call on her (written with charcoal, to reinforce the suggestion of a simple life in a bare hut). This in turn means the recipient should supply the first three lines, which Tadanobu and his friends find they cannot do.” *The Pillow Book*, pp. 316-7.

⁷⁴⁷ *The Pillow Book*, p. 70.

⁷⁴⁸ *The Pillow Book*, p. 30.

another person, rain and wind become agents demanding attention and possessing some degree of narrative actancy and, consequently, becoming ‘named’ as part of the list, part of the rubric.

The recognition that ‘things’ might possess a degree of agency usually only attributable to humans is a mainstay of cultural technique theory.⁷⁴⁹ Part of the technique of attention is also rooted in this affordance of an intersubjectivity with the world of things, according to theories of attention such as Jonardon Ganeri’s.⁷⁵⁰ In an apt paraphrase of Ganeri by Justin E. H. Smith, to pay attention to an object is to elevate it into an intersubjective relationship, “to generate the experience of subjecthood, and to do so bidirectionally” – attending to *something* is to colour our encounter with it in the second-person-mode. “All instances [of attention],” he writes, “whether involving other persons or “mere” objects, partake somewhat of the phenomenological character of the second-person encounter.”⁷⁵¹ The reproduction and emulation of attention, as part of the technique of naming which extracts items from the “continuum” of the real, further contributes to the effect, as Ganeri writes, of “conceiv[ing] [another being as an other] as the centre of an arena of presence and action in which one may oneself be located, but not at the centre.”

Objects in Shōnagon’s world become things by virtue of their own coming-into her field of apprehension, being in this way ‘elevated’ from trivial to essential. But if we might harbour some doubts regarding the cultural specificity of the descriptions above (or to what an “object” might have constituted for the eleventh-century Heian courtier), this quality is also underlined by eighteenth-century Japanese critic Motoori Norinaga, namely, in his famous essay on *mono no*

⁷⁴⁹ “Cultural techniques define the agency of media and things. If media theory were, or had, a grammar, that agency would find its expression in objects claiming the grammatical subject position and cultural techniques standing in for verbs.” Cornelia Vismann. *Op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁷⁵⁰ “So empathy, one’s awareness of another in their otherness, is an attentional state, a fact that is phenomenologically evident if one reflects on what it is like oneself to be that other on whom another’s attention falls. To conceive of a being as other is to conceive of it as the centre of an arena of presence and action in which one may oneself be located, but not at the centre. While phenomenologists have claimed that empathy is a perceptual skill, I will argue instead that empathy is a distinct kind of attention, attention through embodied comportment to the feelings, commitments, and wishes of others as others.” Jonardon Ganeri. *Attention, Not Self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 3-4.

⁷⁵¹ Justin E. H. Smith. *Op. cit.*

aware and the literature of the Heian period.⁷⁵² “To be stirred by external things,” he writes, “is an exact definition of *mono no aware*.” He continues:

Let me give you a few examples of what it means to be moved because of knowledge of *mono no aware*. When one encounters something for which he should be happy and has happy thoughts, his happiness derives from the understanding of the essence of that very thing about which he should feel happy. (...) “to know *mono no aware*” is to discern the nature of happiness or sadness while experiencing the world. When we do not understand the nature of things, there is no feeling thought in our hearts, since we are neither happy nor sad. Without feeling thoughts, songs (*uta*) do not come about.⁷⁵³

The techniques of attention that are part of the act of naming – which requires the recognition of something worthy of being named – are thus weaved into a web of interpersonal relationships with various forms of otherness. The ‘otherness’ of objects which call for attention and, naturally, the others of the palace: the social and aristocratic environment from whose communal aesthetic derives the reasons as to why some objects are named while others must be passed over in silence, and to whom such acts of naming are directed and expect mutual recognition (what the list hides in its articulation of literary and social taboos is expected to be revealed or understood by the audience to which it is directed). As Latour observes, this passing from object to thing – from matters of fact to matters of concern – implies a degree of interpersonal awareness and expression of that very same concern: “a thing is, in one sense, an object out there and, in another sense, an issue very

⁷⁵² Norinaga makes a distinction (already present, as we have seen, in the competing ideologies of *The Pillow Book* and *The Tale of Genji*) between *mono no aware* and *okashi*: “the general distinction,” he writes, “is that, as I mentioned earlier, “charm” is included in *aware*. The specific distinction is that, among the many feelings operating in a person’s heart, charm and joy stir the heart in a shallow way, whereas sadness and love move it deeply.” In other words, *okashi* is, according to Norinaga, part of *aware*, which should include charm and joy (*okashi*), but also sadness and love: “to know *mono no aware* is to discern the power and essence (...) of every single thing existing in this world, and to be stirred by each of them, so as to rejoice at happy occasions, to be charmed by what one should consider charming, to be saddened by sad occurrences, and to love what should be loved.” In any case, we feel justified – partly because of Norinaga’s inclusion of *okashi* within *mono no aware*, partly because of the historical disparaging of *okashi* mentioned before (also present in Norinaga’s essay) – to borrow some of *mono no aware*’s qualities to describe also the affect of *okashi*. Motoori Norinaga. “On *Mono no Aware*.” *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga: A Hermeneutical Journey*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007, pp. 184-5.

⁷⁵³ Motoori Norinaga. *Op. cit.* p. 173. *Uta* is, as the remainder of the essay makes clear, poetry.

much in there, at any rate, a gathering. To use the term I introduced earlier now more precisely, the same word thing designates matters of fact and matters of concern.”⁷⁵⁴

For as often as one might read accounts of lists in literature as underlining, prioritising, or showcasing, the importance of a world of objects and things, this effect or affordance is better described, I believe, in terms of the particular capability of the list to deploy and emulate attention as an affect capable of turning objects into things and thus into ‘others.’ Returning to the technical question of the minimum of the list and the problems therein which *The Pillow Book* makes evident, it becomes clear that while Sève intuitively the correct answer in relating the existence of the list as grounded on a “recognition” act related to the rubric, he makes the mistake of bringing it all back to a mere issue of number. The recognition promised and created by the list of *The Pillow Book* is rather related to the elaboration of a *world* of ‘otherness’ which is threefold: items demanding to be listed and recognised as ‘others,’ the intersubjective communal experience on whose grounds rests the common understanding of the rubric of *okashi* and the norms of courtly etiquette, and, more importantly, the literary effect of the autonomy of the rubric as the invisible Other which the text gradually comes to articulate. The minimum understood in relation to the rubric is, then, less a statement of size than a referral to the overbearing presence of the rubric which allows the list to exist and, once granted a degree of autonomous ‘otherness,’ can animate it, serving as an almost dialogical counterpart to the reader’s role.

This world of others which together construct the various metaphors for the rubric *okashi*, as well as its careful curatorship and maintenance, is Shōnagon’s prime concern. The importance of an aesthetics of the minimum, in this regard, serves also to protect the list of *The Pillow Book* against various extraneous others which do not serve the purposes of the rubric, such as the words of commoners mentioned above. More telling, however, are excerpts such as the following: “it’s

⁷⁵⁴ Bruno Latour. “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern.” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004), p. 233.

terribly depressing to discover some quite worthless person blithely reciting a poem that you yourself had particularly liked and carefully copied down in a notebook.”⁷⁵⁵ When reading it, it is hard not to think of one of the many poems “carefully copied down” in *The Pillow Book*. However, the transition from something “worthless” to something worthy of being carefully copied down – from a matter of fact to a matter of concern – depends on an evaluation by a community of others which her text articulates – and from which some things are necessarily excluded. The ‘minimum’ of the list in the context of courtly *sprezzatura* also reveals such concerns: besides considering what are the minimal gestures which showcase the nature of *okashi* – the minimum number of items which can delineate the rubric – it touches also on the minimum of the effect of polyphonic otherness on which it so dearly depends.

Friendship and Repetition

Bouvard et Pécuchet is no less kept from the spirit of taboo: for Flaubert, it was “le grand danger [de] la monotonie et l’ennui,”⁷⁵⁶ often referred to in letters and connected to the literary representation of the virtue of friendship. The novel, from conception to posthumous publication, becomes enmeshed in a series of taboo-like practices, from the gradual erasing of the term “amitié” in successive drafts and its near absence in the novel to the ensuing reference to it as “fibres secrètes” which unite Bouvard and Pécuchet. This last expression is, of course, followed by the ineffability *topos*, reminiscent in its formulation of Montaigne’s aforementioned account of his friendship with La Boétie: “D’ailleurs,” he writes, “comment expliquer les sympathies? Pourquoi telle particularité, telle imperfection indifférente ou odieuse dans celui-ci enchante-t-elle dans celui-

⁷⁵⁵ *The Pillow Book*, p. 244.

⁷⁵⁶ Letter to Ivan Turgenev. 29 July 1874.

là?”⁷⁵⁷ This is, as mentioned before, merely a signal that nothing will be explained, but only listed and displayed.

As in *The Pillow Book*, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* foregrounds the aesthetics and performative aspects of attention. This is prefaced by statements by the narrator such as the one above, evincing no intention of explanation, interpretation, or definite action on the friends’ part. Instead, there is an invitation to simply behold what is about to take place. *Bouvard* is a novel of observation: the two friends observe (and imitate) one another, they are observed (and scorned) by the villagers, and Flaubert’s divine eye observes all. Observation is presented as the basic attitude grounding the decision to either copy or not. The rare instances in which someone tries to *act upon* what they see in order to enact some change are when Bouvard or Pécuchet attempt to interfere with the routines and politics of the village, or when the villagers interfere in return with the friends’ affairs – largely unsuccessfully in both cases.

Unlike in *The Pillow Book*, however, the lack of correspondence between narrator and character divides and displaces attention among the three people involved: Bouvard, Pécuchet, and Flaubert. The relationship between Flaubert and his two characters is particularly complex, and the borders separating one from the others become increasingly tenuous due to the authorial voice’s encroaching on a narrative which mimics Flaubert’s own investigative project (and the loss of deictic markers in such moments); to the authorship dilemma implied in the *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues*; and to the *affective* relationship between, on the one hand, the two characters and Flaubert and the characters on the other.

Although we have so far been analysing variation in relation to the development of the list as a phenomenon pertaining to the alternation between item and rubric, the presence of a double-list in the novel sheds a different light on the question, as does this complicated account of relational and

⁷⁵⁷ *Bouvard*, p. 204.

authorial identity. In the following long quotation, Massin establishes a connection between variation and the phenomenon of identity which goes to the heart of *Bouvard*'s narrative:

La variation est un dialogue permanent entre l'identité et l'altérité – c'est le même et l'autre. (...) Elle peut comporter le mouvement, la différence (d'où son nom espagnol de *diferencia*), l'augmentation, la diminution, l'oscillation, le retour et le retournement, la modulation, la modification, (...) l'altération, l'adaptation, et ainsi de suite, mais jamais la perte totale de l'identité. Ce qui se produit, en musique, mais aussi dans le langage même (...) c'est une acclimatation, une empathie qui permettent à deux vocables, de s'identifier, de se reconnaître comme ayant la même origine.

Qu'est-ce alors que la variation, sinon l'envie de retourner à l'envers des modèles existants? Il s'agit d'un angle de vue chaque fois différent, renouvelé dix fois, cent fois s'il est besoin (...). Mais on peut alors se poser la question : et si c'étaient les variations qui faisaient exister le thème? Eu puis : qu'est-ce que le *même* (ou qui est le *même*), et qu'est-ce que l'*autre* [(l)ou qui est l'*autre*)?⁷⁵⁸

Massin's questions summarise a key theme in Flaubert's work: between difference and sameness, how does the self become distinct from the other, and how does identity come about? In a specific, passing, reference to *Bouvard*, Massin also underlines two particular aspects: it is a book intended by Flaubert to be about nothing and sustained solely by *style*.⁷⁵⁹ The relationship between repetition and individual style acquires central status in *Bouvard*, as do the questions of sameness, how sameness is managed, and how a variation which is, in the end, always repetition, can make the rubric come about.

The theme of the "same" is prevalent throughout the entirety of the text's life, from the gathering of textual material, to the writing technique, and to the fiction itself. At every level, *Bouvard* hinges on the idea of repetition, both because it is repetitive and also because it repeats what is written elsewhere. The plot tends towards repetition in different ways, besides the obvious

⁷⁵⁸ Massin. *Op. cit.*, pp. 40-7.

⁷⁵⁹ *Idem*, pp. 47-8.

repetitive quality of the characters' exploits. Firstly, Bouvard and Pécuchet are copyists; not only does the text conclude with the return of the two friends to this activity, but their final speeches, despite painting profoundly different visions of the future, see the world as ending in forms of total egalitarianism. Pécuchet sees the end of religion, morality, and even literature, noting that everything will be nothing but a debauchery of peasants, while Bouvard sees the end of evil, desire, and the communion of all peoples.⁷⁶⁰ The unfinished twelfth chapter is even more explicit: when they find a letter from the doctor explaining that they are merely "two harmless imbeciles," they react by refusing to think and resorting to imitating instead – a double repetition since this decision also establishes the circular structure of the novel:

- « Qu'allons-nous en faire? » – Pas de réflexion ! Copions ! Il faut que la page s'emplisse, que « le monument » se complète. – égalité de tout, du bien et du mal, du beau et du laid, de l'insignifiant et du caractéristique. Il n'y a vrai que les phénomènes. – Finir par la vue des deux bonshommes penchés sur leur pupitre, et copiant.⁷⁶¹

The circular and repetitive quality of time in *Bouvard* is reflected in other episodes. We have referenced Borges' observation on the difficulty of establishing a clear chronology for the plot but, as Dord-Crouslé notes, this is evident on a smaller scale as well, reflected even in the characteristic use of the past imperfect tense by Flaubert:

Le temps de Bouvard apparaît comme un temps de la répétition qui empêche le lecteur d'évaluer la durée exacte des phases itératives. (...) [L]'emploi généralisé de l'imparfait indique d'emblée que le processus se répète. (...) Le monde de la fiction dans lequel évoluent les deux personnages n'est pas assimilable à celui de la réalité.

We must speak of a quality of time, she writes, "qui n'est plus linéaire, mais d'essence répétitive."⁷⁶²

⁷⁶⁰ *Bouvard*, pp. 300-1.

⁷⁶¹ Gustave Flaubert. *Bouvard et Pécuchet avec des fragments du second volume, dont le Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues*. Paris: Flammarion, 1999, p. 390. This excerpt is not present in the Éditions du Seuil version of the novel.

⁷⁶² Stéphanie Dord-Crouslé. *Op. cit.*, p. 33. The passage in question is the episode when Pécuchet repeatedly harasses the priest Jeufroy: "Et Pécuchet ne quittait plus M. Jeufroy. Il le surprenait dans son jardin, l'attendait au confessionnal, le relançait dans la sacristie." *Bouvard*, p. 283.

The idea of repetition goes beyond *repetitiveness* (plot- or character-wise) being also present in the notion of *repeating after* something. The activity of copying is thus not circumscribed to the beginning and end of the novel – the time when the two friends exercise their profession – since copying is also a crucial epistemological modality by which they attempt to acquire and use knowledge. To briefly enumerate some examples of the four modalities of knowledge detailed by Dord-Crouslé,⁷⁶³ the two friends rely on direct or indirect quotations from authoritative texts (often incorrectly, which expands the idea of copy also to mis-copy or adaptation), they use their bodies to perform experiments (as in the medicine episode), or rely on their bodies to enact performative dramas of the intellectual content they attempt to process: from adopting certain gestures in order to accompany their professed allegiance to some philosophical theory, to dramatic readings during the literature episode. The idea that both the novel and the characters might be nothing but an assortment of quotations artfully combined is one of the main factors contributing to the previously mentioned impression of their “extreme existential thinness.” In other words, is there a real ‘otherness’ behind the obsessive copying?

The emergence and possibility of an actual otherness which could ground intersubjective experience is again and again put into question by Flaubert. Besides the examples above, there are countless more explicit examples of Bouvard and Pécuchet’s inability to be original by themselves: “their very speech is redundant,” writes Ferguson, “because they both think the same thought.”⁷⁶⁴ Accordingly, Bouvard proposes that they have dinner and Pécuchet remarks that the idea had already occurred to him; despite their not sharing their amorous adventures with one another, Pécuchet’s infatuation with Mélie occurs at the same time as Bouvard’s courting Mme. Bordin; even suicide is not an individualistic affair, since “l’esprit d’imitation” is what convinces Bouvard to die with his friend.

⁷⁶³ Stéphanie Dord-Crouslé. “Quatre Modalités du Savoir dans la Fiction.” *Op. cit.*, pp. 455-68.

⁷⁶⁴ Frances Ferguson. *Op. cit.*, p. 793.

Finally, the method (and anxieties) of copy and repetition extend also to the novelistic techniques and research methodology employed by Flaubert. Quotes such as the one above from the twelfth chapter can easily be attributed to the friends' toils just as well as the author's. We reproduce here an expanded version of one of the letters quoted in the previous section in which he too comments on the increasing sense of sameness underlying his work as a writer-copyist, on his desire to simply "fill the page, complete the monument," and finish his job:

Savez-vous à combien se montent les volumes qu'il m'a fallu absorber pr mes deux bonshommes ? – À plus de 1,500. Mon dossier de notes a 8 pouces de hauteur. – & tout cela ou rien, c'est la même chose. (...) Enfin je commence mon dernier chapitre !⁷⁶⁵

Quickly this process runs the risk of rendering *Bouvard* nothing but a series of clichés and stereotypes – precisely like the *Dictionnaire* comprising its second half or as in what Ferguson imagines could be Flaubert's aims: "a literature that is so purely descriptive as to amount only to the mere publication of what already exists"⁷⁶⁶ – language as pure nomenclature. Yet, to the extent that it is a novel partially composed of clichés and citations, it becomes in the end more than a mere combinatorial game of quotes. Being a novel as well as a list of the unique friendship of two unique individuals, *Bouvard* returns obsessively to the question of the relationship between sameness and difference, and the development of individual style.

Style is another concern which occupies Flaubert during the writing process: in collecting material for his novel, he goes beyond the accumulation of data and facts in the style of the scientific novels of, for example, Jules Verne,⁷⁶⁷ gathering also "specimens" of a variety of literary styles. In his notes for the second volume, we find excerpts of the *style médical – génital*, *style agricole*, *style catholique*, *style cavalier*, *style romantique*, and so on.⁷⁶⁸ This comprises a

⁷⁶⁵ Letter to Edma Roger des Genettes. 24 January 1880.

⁷⁶⁶ Frances Ferguson. *Op. cit.*, p. 802.

⁷⁶⁷ See Gaspard Turin. "Imaginaire Génétique: La Critique Face à la Liste chez Jules Verne." *Genesis* 47 (2018), pp. 53-66.

⁷⁶⁸ Gustave Flaubert. "III. Spécimens de tous les styles." *Bouvard et Pécuchet avec des fragments du « second volume », dont le Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues*. Paris: Flammarion, 1999, pp. 400-2.

fundamental part of the investigation related to the status of the two friends as imitators, requiring the author to become fluent in the style of the works in order to write the impersonation of the copyists.

The possibility of a unique style in a game of pure repetition might be one of the hidden themes of the plot of *Bouvard*. The dissolution of voices into a confusing mass or the contradictory picking out of individual style out of that same mass is a common concern for Flaubert and his characters: thus Bouvard worries – in the chapter dedicated to politics – how to be unique when sameness seems inevitable or, in short, how to develop one's style:

Ils arriveraient à l'autre bout de la France, leur dernier sou mangé par le voyage ; – et il retrouverait là-bas sous des noms différents, le même curé, le même recteur, le même préfet ! (...)

Bouvard était surpris par le contraste des choses qui l'entouraient avec celles que l'on disait – car il semble toujours que les paroles doivent correspondre aux milieux, et que les hauts plafonds soient faits pour les grandes pensées.⁷⁶⁹

More than in *The Pillow Book* (in which any trace of individual style must succumb to a shared aesthetic sensibility), the ability of the list to articulate a sense of autonomous 'otherness' connected to the individual characters which it lists becomes a central concern.

The idea of repetition is present in *Bouvard* in the sense that each item in the list serves as a repetitive instance of the rubric of their friendship. *Their* friendship, because the taboo of *Bouvard* as pertaining to the theme of friendship concerns solely their *individual* friendship. However, each item comprises also an instance or example of copying itself, in one of the many forms detailed above – almost as if the rubric was not friendship but 'copying.' But is one so different from the other? Far from being two separate processes, what this overlap tells us about *Bouvard* is how its literary techniques articulate a particular view of its themes, namely, that personal style can emerge

⁷⁶⁹ *Bouvard*, pp. 255-6.

out of repetition, that friendship can be a fertile ground for the development of personal style, and, finally, that friendship itself is a kind of repetition.

On the subject of friendship, Nehamas echoes Massin: like variation, friendship “makes us ask, who here is the you and who the I,”⁷⁷⁰ due the difficult relationships it makes tangible between individual self, external contributions to the self, and the ideal of style – in Nietzsche’s sense of style as the fitting of disparate elements “into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye” – which might be one of friendship’s positive outcomes. Thus,

A shattered self is what we are all faced with at first – an accidental self, made up of haphazard elements, *picked up at different times, in different contexts, from different people, from various books, and cultural environments*. Individuality requires the organisation of these elements into a whole within which they are no longer of hazard – a coherent whole to which each makes a distinct contribution. But coherence is not enough. The whole these elements compose must also be distinctive. It must have a *style* that expresses one’s distinctive character.⁷⁷¹

The experience, performance, and exploration of friendship follow the same lines as the journey to acquire knowledge: identity and individuality through imitation, and variation as the premise for style. In this case, the performance of knowledge as copying *is* the performance of friendship – the modes of knowing employed by the two friends are also how they come to know, understand, and love one another. Copying, imitation, and repetition, all are expressions of the technique of naming as a technique of metaphorical approximation, here not just a technical or literary strategy employed by the author or narrator, but part of the actions of the characters in the fictional world itself. After all, the two friends are doing the same thing as Flaubert: copying in order to approach something original which is just out of their ability (or willingness) to express. We can say of friendship as

⁷⁷⁰ Alexander Nehamas. *Op. cit.*, p. 225.

⁷⁷¹ *Idem*, p. 222. My emphasis.

either an abstract virtue or as a concrete rubric of the novel, that it “provide[s] the ground on which we can turn all the disparate elements of ourselves (...) into a more coherent (...) whole.”⁷⁷²

The modes of imitation as the foundation for friendship underline the importance of attention as the ground for identifying what is worthy of copying. But we cannot really say that attention in *Bouvard* concerns an elevation of objects to any sort of intersubjective relationship. There is a sense of egocentrism stopping them from being attentive in the same way as Shōnagon, as in their visits to the Parisian museums, in which the exhibitions seem to act only as mirrors for their fascination with their own budding personalities, or to the various ways by which any and every object they turn their attention to serves only as a springboard to other investigations – they might become objects of temporary attention but never, as in *The Pillow Book*, demand attention to themselves as others. The only other that matters for Bouvard is Pécuchet, and vice versa.

Episodes such as the following from the medicine sequence are one among many examples of an almost anti-realist (at times oneiric) bias, turned away from the things of the world, despite their professed interest in them, and more dedicated to destructive reduction than elevation:

Le cerveau leur inspira des réflexions philosophiques.

Ils distinguaient fort bien dans l'intérieur, le septum lucidum composé de deux lamelles et la glande pinéale, qui ressemble à un petit pois rouge. Mais il y avait des pédoncules et des ventricules, des arcs, des piliers, des étages, des ganglions, et des fibres de toutes les sortes, et le foramen de Pacchioni, et le corps de Pacini, bref un amas inextricable, de quoi user leur existence.

Quelquefois dans un vertige, ils démontaient complètement le cadavre, puis se trouvaient embarrassés pour remettre en place les morceaux.

Cette besogne était rude, après le déjeuner surtout ! Et ils ne tardaient pas à s'endormir, Bouvard le menton baissé, l'abdomen en avant, Pécuchet la tête dans les mains, avec ses deux coudes sur la table. (...)

⁷⁷² *Idem*, p. 224.

Quand ils étaient las d'un organe, ils passaient à un autre – abordant ainsi et délaissant tour à tour le cœur, l'estomac, l'oreille, les intestins. – Car le bonhomme de carton les assommait, malgré leurs efforts pour s'y intéresser.⁷⁷³

If medicine and its real(ist) objects fail to capture their interest, there is something curious resulting from Flaubert's humorous narration and listing. While the two friends are occupied with the dismantling of the mannequin – after presenting the reader with a list of body parts –, the narrator turns the focus back on them and disassembles in his own writing their own bodies into a short double-list of body parts.⁷⁷⁴ It is as if the two friends cannot escape repetition: even if they are not interested in the mannequin, they are stunned (“assomait”) to such a degree that it returns, in dreams, like an apparition.

Furthermore, Bouvard and Pécuchet often turn away from things because of a perceived confusion related to the complexity of the universe – a complexity that is as real as is imputed by their own ignorance and lack of curiosity to understand it. The amount of details, the ways in which they are interconnected (“un amas inextricable”), and how to relate to them personally (“de quoi user leur existence”), launches them into vertigo and then sleep. In sleep, however, a personal relationship with the text is finally found, which requires abandoning the state of wakefulness in order to manifest itself: not the active attention of the scientist, but the passive attention of the “spectateur.” In sleep, their involuntary movements draw them closer to their object of study, as literary creations and literary *self*-creations: an assemblage of parts. The attention of Bouvard and Pécuchet which allows them to name the items of their list is, to quote Massin again, “une empathie qui permettent à deux vocables, de s'identifier, de se reconnaître comme ayant la même origine.” This origin, of course, is the rubric as the only possible idea articulating all items into a coherent whole: their friendship also as an engendering of their individual personalities.

⁷⁷³ *Bouvard*, p. 221.

⁷⁷⁴ This happens in other instances as well: “C'était pendant l'été de 1845, dans le jardin, sous la tonnelle. Pécuchet, un petit banc sous les pieds, lisait tout haut de sa voix caverneuse, sans fatigue, ne s'arrêtant que pour plonger les doigts dans sa tabatière. Bouvard l'écoutait, la pipe à la bouche, les jambes ouvertes, le haut du pantalon déboutonné.” *Bouvard*, pp. 238-9.

The mannequin episode underlines a tension that is not only particular to *Bouvard* but to Flaubert's work which has become a common observation on the inheritance and influence of his novels: detail versus omniscience, individual perception and free indirect style, the development and representation of individuality; "stylishness, free indirect style, and detail," writes James Wood, "I have described Flaubert, whose work opens up and tries to solve this tension, and who is really its founder."⁷⁷⁵ In the famous letter to Louise Colet, Flaubert writes the oft-quoted pronouncement that "l'auteur, dans son œuvre, doit être comme Dieu dans l'univers, présent partout, et visible nulle part" and adds what should, in his understanding, be the reader's response to this amalgam:

L'art étant une seconde nature, le créateur de cette nature-là doit agir par des procédés analogues : que l'on sente dans tous les atomes, à tous les aspects, une *impassibilité* cachée et infinie. L'effet, pour le spectateur, doit être une espèce d'*ébahissement*.⁷⁷⁶

The typical Flaubertian flaneur is an artificial (in the sense that it is the product of the author's artifice) individual composed of a series of details artfully displayed or hidden. The intended effect on the reader is one of "ébahissement" – a variation of being "assommé."

In another episode, when the two friends are enjoying a moment of pure observation of the starry sky, Flaubert writes that the "majesté de la création leur causa un ébahissement."⁷⁷⁷ It is possible that such an existential astonishment is of a similar logic to the one described in the letter: the friends also talk about atoms and the universe or about the microcosmic nature of their own selves. But what is "la création?" Is it the objective world the fiction shares with ours, the creative taking over of this world by the overexcited imaginations of the friends, or even the fictional creation of the writer? It is, in the end, all of them: what truly stuns and astonishes in *Bouvard* is the sense that nothing that could be uttered or named can escape the rubric of friendship.

⁷⁷⁵ James Wood. *How Fiction Works*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008, p. 38.

⁷⁷⁶ Letter to Louise Colet. 9 December 1852.

⁷⁷⁷ *Bouvard*. p. 226.

Attention in *Bouvard* does not concern the elevation of objects into things: in the context of attention as prefacing the activities of friendship and naming, Bouvard and Pécuchet are already people endowed with subject-hood (even if that subject-hood is put into question by evaluations like the doctor's). It does concern, however, the reframing of what could be seen as mere imitation as an honest and veritable expression of that same subjecthood. In other words, every 'atom,' that is, anything that Bouvard and Pécuchet could possibly land their greedy hands on, is already endowed with their presence: what they bring into the things that they learn, is the possibility of becoming the people that they already are. In the sense that attention is related to the experience of an otherness which can be elicited by the technique of the list, in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* it is connected to the literary representation of the ways by which two friends can respectively engender and see one another's individuality in everything that their friendship touches. In Flaubert's novel, endless repetition effortlessly turns into novelty.

The Phantom and the Other

In what concerns *Moby-Dick*, it is inevitable that we have already made a number of references to this sense of the unsayable lying at the heart of the work, an unsayable which often takes on the qualities of taboo but around which the textual material of the novel converges and out of which comes about. For this reason, *Moby-Dick* continues to allow us to take a closer look at the relationships between the name, the unnameable, otherness, repetition, etc. But it is the obsession with language and the possibility of writing a rubric that is always just out of reach that characterises Ishmael's preoccupations.

One of *Moby-Dick*'s main concerns refers to the capacity to and the consequences of trying to ascribe linguistic terms to things. In the case of the whale – the mystery and taboo at the heart of the text – its various onomastic mutations furnish much of the textual content of the novel: these are the

endless lists of the whale's whiteness, its depiction in artworks, the objects and techniques used in its pursuit, etc – in sum, that whole slice of the cosmos which seems in Melville's work to come about solely on account of the existence and metaphysical implications of Moby-Dick the whale. One might say that this is the first issue raised by the novel, since in "etymology" we get a list of different terms for "whale" in thirteen languages, making clear, as Belknap writes, "that the singular 'Etymon,' or true name of the thing, will elude comprehension because of a Babel-like confusion of tongues."⁷⁷⁸

We see the question of naming in the sense described by Leach rehearsed again and again in smaller episodes. All of Ishmael's categorising efforts ask the same question: what defines the lack between two things, what is it that we stop being able to perceive, once two different categories are named? "Cetology," with its classificatory fantasy of the whale family and the unwillingness to separate fish from whales rests on this issue, as does, for example, the repetition of Bulkington and Queequeg described earlier: what is left out, once the two characters are named? The closer they are, the more questions the precision of the nomenclature raises. Repetitive attempts at naming comprise most of the catalogues interweaved throughout the novel, each being, in their attempt to name, a list of 'ineffables,' providing a metaphor for the whale's own ineffable quality. We will analyse two instances of this practice: the double metaphor of fungal decay and death – yeast, pyramids, and the hieroglyphic doctrine –, and the image of the phantom.

On the subject of hieroglyphs, one might draw the line between Melville's text and Thomas Browne's own writings on the matter: as an assiduous reader of Browne, Melville would have been particularly attuned to the Norwich doctor's – and thus the seventeenth-century's – own hieroglyphical philosophy, still rooted in magical practices and Renaissance mystical philosophy. But the nineteenth-century had its own reasons for turning collective attention towards

⁷⁷⁸ Robert E. Belknap. *Op. cit.*, p. 132.

hieroglyphical writing:⁷⁷⁹ by the time *Moby-Dick* was written, Jean-François Champollion's discoveries had been gradually replacing previous assumptions which connected hieroglyphical writing with forms of magic and mysticism lost to modernity, inspired and following the writings of figures such as Athanasius Kircher. At the same time, a common effort was in place to retrieve and salvage the mystical value and interpretation of the hieroglyphs for a contemporary, post-Champollion, audience – this often required radical and deliberate misinterpretations of Champollion's findings.⁷⁸⁰ Ishmael goes further and subtler: fully adhering to the metaphysical implications of a hieroglyphical reality, he consigns Champollion's erudition to 'minor' hieroglyphs, writing that while he “deciphered the wrinkled granite hieroglyphics (...) there is no Champollion to decipher the Egypt of every man's and every being's face.”⁷⁸¹

Pyramids and hieroglyphs as metaphors for indecipherability are found throughout *Moby-Dick*. Yet, the “*nameless* yeast” of the painting hanging on the walls of Spouter-Inn is one of the first clues to Ishmael's concern with names and the unnameable, prefacing the “nameless horror” and “nameless terror” in “The Whiteness of the Whale.” Yeast possesses both the implication of an ‘other’ form of life (fungi being in the nineteenth-century still a strange ‘other’ form of being,

⁷⁷⁹ It is perhaps useful to provide a short account of the impact and importance of the figure and discovery of Champollion to the writers of the American Renaissance. Melville's East Coast milieu, of course, was at the heart of the enthusiasm which characterised the popular reception of the new Egyptology: architectural influences (like the New York Halls of Justice where *Bartleby* dies), vigorous discussion in academic outlets such as *The North American Review*, public displays of Egyptian curios such as mummies, for instance, at Peale's Museum and Gallery of Fine Arts in New York in 1823, George Gliddon's popular lectures (which preceded a two-year tour around the country) in Boston, in 1842 (his book would go on to sell twenty-four thousand copies), and, no less significant, the purchase of Egyptian artefacts by the leader of a religious sect whose reinterpretation would later give rise to the Church of the Latter-Day Saints. As John T. Irwin writes, “that Europe and America, during the period 1800-50, were swept by a wave of interest in the antiquities of Egypt is nowadays one of the less well remembered facets of nineteenth-century history.” Yet, its literary influences are widespread: Poe, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, Emerson, Melville, *all* drew on this wave of interest for their literary and poetic imagination, with a particular fascination for the nature and philosophy of hieroglyphical writings, which often figure in their works. John T. Irwin. *American Hieroglyphs: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphs in the American Renaissance*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980, p. 3.

⁷⁸⁰ *Idem*, p. 6.

⁷⁸¹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 380. My emphasis.

neither plant nor animal,⁷⁸² fiercely debated in scientific circles) but also of a self-organisation which makes something arise out of nothing due to the mysterious phenomenon of fermentation. It comes up again to describe the inscrutable will of the whale captured by Stubb, swimming away by virtue of “the mad yeast which he brewed”⁷⁸³ in its head. In turn, in addition to yeast, the whale’s head – which is to say its inscrutable intentions and will – is often also associated with the Egyptian pyramids, as when Moby-Dick is described as having “a peculiar snow-white wrinkled forehead, and a high, pyramidical white hump,”⁷⁸⁴ or when a particular brand of the white-whale’s ineffability, owing to its lack of language and unwillingness to communicate with humans, is described as a “pyramidical silence.”⁷⁸⁵

In effect, the mysteries of fungal growth and pyramidical/hieroglyphical inaccessibility comprise two sides of the same coin in *Moby-Dick*. The two metaphors underline similar aspects, such as inaccessibility, otherness, and an association with that which decays – mummies in the case of the pyramids, fungal rot in the case of yeast. They meet in one of Ishmael’s many declarations of interest in going out to sea in “Loomings,” foreshadowing the danger of venturing to such places:

And as for going as a cook,—though I confess there is considerable glory in that, a cook being a sort of officer on ship-board—yet, somehow I never fancied broiling fowls—though once broiled, judiciously buttered, and judgmatically salted and peppered, there is no one who will speak more respectfully, not to say reverentially, of a broiled fowl than I will. It is out of the *idolatrous dotings of the old Egyptians* upon broiled ibis and roasted river horse, that you see the *mummies of those creatures in their huge bake-houses the pyramids*.⁷⁸⁶

⁷⁸² Yeast was recognised as a fungus in 1837, by Theodor Schwann. However, Melville’s lack of knowledge regarding fungi is in tandem with both his times and culture. As Valentina Pavlova Wasson writes in the incomparable *Mushrooms, Russia and History*, “on those rare occasions when the great English poets deign to pay serious attention to mushrooms, they habitually link these lovely creatures with death and decay.” Indeed, the mushroom, the fungus, yeast, were often, in Melville’s Anglo-Saxon perspective, objects of mystery, or repulsion, or both. See Valentina Pavlova Wasson, R. Gordon Wasson. “Mushrooms and the English.” *Mushrooms, Russia and History*. Vol. 1. New York: Pantheon Books, 1957, pp. 19-36, and “The Anatomy of Micophobia.” *Op. cit.*. Vol. 2. pp. 336-50.

⁷⁸³ *Moby-Dick*, p. 309.

⁷⁸⁴ *Moby-Dick*, p. 198.

⁷⁸⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p. 380.

⁷⁸⁶ *Moby-Dick*, p. 6.

And again in his description of Queequeg's tattooed body, which shows, on the other hand, that even if he wanted to, it is not possible at all to venture to places guarded by "idolatrous dotings" where things are destined to rot away:

And this tattooing, had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those *hieroglyphic marks*, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to *unfold*; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them; and these mysteries were therefore *destined in the end to moulder away* with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last.⁷⁸⁷

The crucial relation between these images and metaphors concerns the (im)possibility of communication: hieroglyphs and fungi stand for an ultimate otherness to which Ishmael ascribes a possibility of language which forecloses the ability to read. As the second quote suggests, to be unreadable is to be destined to die.

Although fair attention has been paid to the hieroglyphic imagination in Melville's novel, comparatively little interest is bestowed on its counterpart of fungal rot, and their coupling in the two fragments evinces a shared approach to the problem of language and reading. Evident in both quotations is his understanding that whatever truth hides in hieroglyphical epistemology, the hieroglyphical counterpart to what is readable is always destined to decay, disintegrate, and remain hidden. Yeast, like the magic of hieroglyphs, stands for a vital force whose nature is ultimately outside the scope of human understanding. Mould, after all, is also endowed with a kind of capacity for writing or, at the very least, *displaying writing*: fungus is associated with the fanciful imagination of the "rumour" which arises not through any storytelling effort but "naturally" ("fabulous rumors naturally grow out of the very body of all surprising terrible events,—as the

⁷⁸⁷ *Moby-Dick*, p. 524.

smitten tree gives birth to its fungi”⁷⁸⁸); a “dull, spotted, green mould” covers the letter that Starbuck recovers from the ship Jeroboam, of which “Death himself might well have been the post-boy”⁷⁸⁹; and in “The Doubloon” – the key chapter in which the hieroglyphic self of Queequeg comes face to face with the hieroglyph of the world represented in the coin –, this is what Starbuck has to say when he too arrives to examine “Belshazzar’s awful writing”:

So in this vale of Death, God girds us round; and over all our gloom, the sun of Righteousness still shines a beacon and a hope. If we bend down our eyes, the dark vale shows her mouldy soil; but if we lift them, the bright sun meets our glance half way, to cheer. Yet, oh, the great sun is no fixture; and if, at midnight, we would fain snatch some sweet solace from him, we gaze for him in vain! This coin speaks wisely, mildly, truly, but still sadly to me. I will quit it, lest Truth shake me falsely.⁷⁹⁰

Is there any alternative to the deathly “mouldy soil”? How should one who wishes to read and write this writing of the world articulate the impossibility of literary representation with the limited register of false truths?

As in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, Ishmael often reveals a conception of “nature as possessed of a capacity of its own for acting technically; whereas if we did not ascribe such a mode of operation to nature, its causality would have to be regarded as blind mechanism.”⁷⁹¹ Forms of unreadable writing, formed by natural processes but behind whom an ‘other’ might be intuited are a constant source of concern throughout the novel: besides Queequeg’s tattoos (which are unnatural in a ‘civilised’ sense), the geological “wrinkle” formations of the new science of geology, or the science of physiognomy, there is the whale’s marked skin and human skin itself, from which Fedallah seems to intuit a universal language, if only one could read it: “Fedallah was calmly

⁷⁸⁸ *Moby-Dick*, p. 195.

⁷⁸⁹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 346.

⁷⁹⁰ *Moby-Dick*, p. 472.

⁷⁹¹ Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Judgement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 188.

eyeing the right whale's head, and ever and anon glancing from the deep wrinkles there to the lines in his own hand."⁷⁹²

The question concerns the problem of the fundamentally unreadable nature of whatever it is that this vital force has to say about itself – Queequeg and the whale are necessarily quiet about their own writings, both what is written *on* them and *about* them. The problem only becomes more acute when this language is confronted with the only language that Ishmael can use to communicate: the human language of literature written in English. That they are incompatible almost to an existential degree, is, however, what animates Ishmael's repeated attempts to describe this phenomenon.

As a writer, Ishmael's problems concern the coming to face with a series of mysterious others who are also writers themselves – the author of the 'book' of nature, the one who hides behind the mask through which Ahab wishes to "strike," or whatever hides under the white "veil" in "The Whiteness of the Whale." By his own admission, he is less of a writer than he is a mere "decipherer" of the cosmic project of a previous writer. If Ishmael and Queequeg are indeed a representation of the "doubled nature of the self" – "the writing self and the written self"⁷⁹³ –, none of them has an easy and uncompromising relation to the activity of writing – or, for that matter, reading:

If then, Sir William Jones, who read in thirty languages, could not read the simplest peasant's face in its profounder and more subtle meanings, how may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale's brow? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can.⁷⁹⁴

If things, even as they present themselves in the form of 'writing,' are nevertheless impossible to read, it should not be surprising that Ishmael's desire to interact with them, to have them in his

⁷⁹² *Moby-Dick*, p. 358.

⁷⁹³ John T. Irwin. *Op. cit.*, p. 323.

⁷⁹⁴ *Moby-Dick*, p. 380.

view *as if* he could read them, should be reduced to an ethics of attention: a commitment to waiting and naming what can be pseudo-named, knowing and cautiously recognising that a “nameless” Other is behind such signs and clues. Sure enough, Ishmael tells us that what he is doing is less writing than a “putting before” the reader, or that he himself cannot read, and thus must decipher: while the whale might be the central ‘text’ of the novel, it is unreadable: “dissect him how I may,” he says, “I but go skin deep.”⁷⁹⁵ There is an emphatic refusal to conceive of communication as an active effort to convey meaning and intention – perhaps humans too, Ishmael suggests, can communicate, bond, and find mutual understanding within a similar context to the natural and ancient phenomena of asemia which he catalogues.

Ishmael’s project in *Moby-Dick* is also a quest for linguistic origins, inscribing Melville’s work, in this way, in the literary tradition of the American Renaissance as fundamentally concerned with the possibility of a poetic, universal, cosmic, or ancient language for humanity – one that is, paradoxically, impossible to read or write. However, far from letting himself get too infatuated with the possibility of glimpsing said language, Ishmael more often keeps a safe distance from the nourishing life of the whale in order to safeguard his own:

Now, mark. Unerringly impelling this dead, impregnable, uninjurable wall, and this most buoyant thing within; there swims behind it all a mass of tremendous life, only to be adequately estimated as piled wood is—by the cord; and all obedient to one volition (...). But clear Truth is a thing for salamander giants only to encounter; how small the chances for the provincials then?⁷⁹⁶

Adding to the metaphorical constellation of Egyptian references and artefacts, and connecting it to the religious spirit of taboo, Ishmael concludes with a rhetorical question, “what befel the weakling youth lifting the dread goddess’s veil at Sais?”

⁷⁹⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p. 414.

⁷⁹⁶ *Moby-Dick*, p. 370.

To the mortality of those things which unreadability encloses in incomprehension, Ishmael thus adds the mortality of those who, nevertheless, wish to read them. Not coincidentally, out of all the options he considers for embarking on the *Pequod* (making a point of mentioning that he would not harbour any grievances if ordered “to get a broom and sweep down the decks”⁷⁹⁷), being a cook is the one he refuses, first ironically, and then with the strange and left-field allusion to the Egyptian “idolatrous dotings.” However, a contradiction in Ishmael’s discourse becomes apparent: if he refuses to go into the “bake-houses” for reasons seemingly connected to the protection of his own well-being and his desire to avoid a place of death, the opening of the novel is nothing short of a welcoming gesture to the possibility that he might be committing suicide: “This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship.”⁷⁹⁸ His changing stance throughout the novel can be summarised as an essay on the passive nature of the writer as a decipherer; he claims never to “go as a passenger” but nor “as a Commodore, or a Captain, or a Cook.”⁷⁹⁹ This ambiguity concerning the characterisation of the writer-reader-decipherer touches also his understanding of what it means to be a passenger. It is in this light that his invitation to a form of suicide should be understood: as a project which carries with it the weight of self-inflicted death, Ishmael transfers the burden of another kind of, more meaningful, death to Ahab and Queequeg, while he watches, records, and experiences only vicariously.

His own writing acquires some of this distanced and vicarious quality, reflected in the limited tangential quality of the items and the rubric. Hieroglyphs and fungi serve as metaphors for a relationship of deliberate limited readability and writing, and this becomes evident in what is perhaps the most explicit metaphor for this unnameable other: the phantom. All those writings whose hand is beyond human knowledge converge in the imagination of the phantasmagorical

⁷⁹⁷ *Moby-Dick*, p. 6.

⁷⁹⁸ *Moby-Dick*, p. 3.

⁷⁹⁹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 5.

whale. As Irwin underlines, its “mystic-marked brow is the central hieroglyph in the novel.”⁸⁰⁰ In its successive reinventions and returns throughout the text, the protean quality of the “phantom” metaphor gives life to the list that *Moby-Dick* is, appearing as the ultimate mystery which its items attempt to approach.

To briefly enumerate such instances, the “ungraspable *phantom* of life” appears, at a first moment, as the reflection of the human condition which “we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans.” Appearing, thus, as an immediate call and inspiration to travel and to write, the phantom slowly begins to be articulated as the rubric of the list or, as Ishmael calls it, “the key to it all,”⁸⁰¹ echoing the recuperative meaning of Hamon. Crucially, Ishmael charges his metaphor with the weight of *hybris*, connecting the impulse to gaze at the sea and its phantom with the myth of Narcissus. The knowledge of this danger, however, is the first prompt to see not the reflected self, but rather an other, the ungraspable and phantasmagorical nature that serves both aspects of the negative dimensions of naming: it locates its true description outside of literature (taking the sense of “to grasp” both in a conceptual and linguistic sense) and serves also as a *topos* of ineffability, once it becomes obvious that the intent of the novel will be to turn this key over and over – to orbit this phantom or to list and name it.

The phantom is then “unfolded” into items throughout the novel, variations of that same ungraspable something lying at the centre of Ishmael’s tale, which, not being able to name he must otherwise list: the white whale is “one grand *hooded phantom*, like a snow hill in the air,” but so is Queequeg when he is compared to Ishmael’s childhood nightmares, a “*nameless*, unimaginable, *silent* form or *phantom*.” Afterwards, when Ishmael’s anxiety is soothed by Queequeg’s presence, it is instead “the evening shades and *phantoms* gathering round the casements, and peering in upon us *silent*, solitary twain” which have now been projected to a threat outside of the couple’s domicile.

⁸⁰⁰ John T. Irwin. *Op. cit.*, p. 287.

⁸⁰¹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 5.

We have already quoted the passage in which Fedallah is compared to a phantom, but the whole of Ahab's crew is accounted for by Ishmael as "five *dusky phantoms* that seemed fresh formed out of air." And finally, by the end of the novel, it is the Pequod itself who becomes a "*fading phantom*, as in the gaseous *Fata Morgana*."⁸⁰² Ishmael's piling of phantom upon phantom showcases particularly well the tension between repetition and difference underlying the technique of naming.

Taking to heart Ishmael's assertion that in the phantom resides the "key" to the full meaning of the novel (and perhaps even the mysteries of existence), we can take it also as the narrator's own explicit proposal for this list's rubric. The first immediate point of comparison between all these instances lies in their expression of something akin to 'fear of the unknown', an emotion closely associated with taboo: nightmarish and threatening, the phantom is the taboo of existence, what hides under the veil at Sais, given a form that can lurk, peer, ambush, and who only by the end of the novel is laid to rest as mere mirage. Despite the variety of qualifiers and associated characters, the images of the phantom (or other monikers such as "shade") reflect in their similarity a repetitive quality arising out of the essential lack of definition: the items of *Moby-Dick* arrive always as images just slightly out of focus, whose eventual possibility of revealing something truly distinguishing about its central rubric are lost in their most crippling similarities. Ultimately, all which can be written about even the most marvellous events is doomed to suffer the fate of being a weak repetition of the irrecoverable words of phantoms:

But I must be content with only one more and a concluding illustration; a remarkable and most significant one, by which you will not fail to see, that not only is the most marvellous event in this book corroborated by plain facts of the present day, but that these marvels (like all marvels) are mere repetitions of the ages, so that for the millionth time we say amen with Solomon—Verily there is nothing new under the sun.⁸⁰³

⁸⁰² *Moby-Dick*, pp. 8, 29, 57, 235, 623.

⁸⁰³ *Moby-Dick*, p. 228.

As a strange apparition himself, one who might recall ghost stories by announcing himself to the reader instructing him to call him by *a* name, Ishmael, whose role as passenger of the story-vessel Pequod secures survival by refusing to stay too firmly connected to a world which eludes proper representation, provides us with the only salvageable writing out of the whole ordeal: a list of those who got close to reading the jottings of the phantasmagorical hand of God in the book of nature and their inevitable death.

Truth and Generation

If *Moby-Dick* is obsessed with death, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* is just as fascinated with life. Despite Browne's wide range of interests, it is fairly uncontroversial to say that no other subject fired up the Norwich doctor's scientific, artistic, and philosophical imagination as the mechanisms of life. He consistently returns in his reflections to the divine and natural origins of life and to the ways by which beings engender other different, and somehow the same, beings. The "wonders" of generation, Browne quipped, "are only second to those of the Creation."⁸⁰⁴

In this section, then, we propose to analyse the overlap between Browne's scientific approach to the question of generation and the rhetorical strategies of *Pseudodoxia*. The rubric of "Truth" in relation to which every single item is presented, evolves, and takes visible form, in Browne's text, in a way which is analogous to that of living things. In order to fully grasp Thomas Browne's understanding of the generation of ideas (and truth and falsity) as well as their bearing on the structure of *Pseudodoxia*, one must thus consider his understanding of biological generation. Monstrosity comprises another essential piece of the puzzle, not only describing one aspect of biological generation but the generation of certain ideas as well. It acknowledges the fact that some ideas and the knowledge of them are monstrous but that no account of the rubric of 'Truth' could

⁸⁰⁴ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 491.

dispense with it – we will return to it towards the end of this subsection. Finally, Browne’s thoughts on the matter of generation are complex and far from his contemporary orthodoxy, and for this reason, it is necessary to preface the analysis with a short backdrop and context.

The scientific state of the art in Browne’s days was divided between the more recent theory of preformation and those who, like Browne, espoused an ‘old-fashioned’ belief in epigenesis. The popular ‘preformation doctrine,’ championed by figures such as Leeuwenhoek, Descartes, or Leibniz, appealed as much to new the scientific imagination just as it did to theological principles. It “comprehended all generation in the original act of creation, multitudinous miniatures of mankind being encased within our first parents”⁸⁰⁵ – an endless nesting of boxes inside boxes, all traceable to the single act of divine, original, Creation. Thomas Browne, in departing from this ‘modern’ doctrine, returns to the epigenesis of the Neoplatonists (ironically closer to the present-day’s scientific consensus), by which embryos, instead of containing miniature versions of new beings (and their own embryos, and so on...), are instead undifferentiated particles which grow and change into their adult forms. Unique to Browne’s view is the inclusion, together with epigenesis, of other seemingly contradictory notions such as the Aristotelian Idea, pangenesis, or spontaneous generation.

The Aristotelian concept of the Idea claims that, as Browne writes on Adam’s rib, “parts of the seed do seem to contain the Idea and power of the whole,”⁸⁰⁶ explaining why even a mutilated parent, such as Adam, produces ‘complete’ offspring. Pangenesis argues, instead, that every part of the parent’s body contributes *individually* to the formation of the egg. Unlike in Aristotle’s Idea, these contributions are unique: the tail furnishes information about the tail, ears about ears, etc. And if it is already difficult to understand why Browne would feel the need to adopt two seemingly contradictory accounts of biological generation, he adopts yet a third possibility: beyond theories

⁸⁰⁵ Egon Stephen Merton. *Science and Imagination in Sir Thomas Browne*. New York: King’s Crown Press, 1949, p. 45.

⁸⁰⁶ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 490.

which linked parents directly to offspring, Browne accommodates within his worldview the theory of spontaneous generation, which claims that some beings can arise out of nothing – offspring with no parents.

The deployment of all such theories at once produces odd conclusions, as Egon Stephen Merton notes:

We have seen how diverse and even contradictory theories of science could lie side by side in his mind. Thus the “atom” of duckweed, which so literally sprouted from water, depended for its “emergency” upon the mutually inconsistent theories of preformation and spontaneous generation. Thus the “parts” of the seed, which accounted for heredity, involved in their operation a very un-Aristotelian, physical pangenesis and a quite Aristotelian, metaphysical Idea. (...) Generally speaking, the diverse elements of Browne’s science were not synthesized into a coherent view, but were left to contribute to the heterogeneity of his mind.⁸⁰⁷

Merton sees this as a symptom of Browne’s “failure to construct new wholes,” a failure “within Browne’s philosophy (...) but also a failure within his sciences.”⁸⁰⁸ However, Merton does not consider the corollary of his own hypothesis: if the science of biological generation had such a commanding influence on the remaining areas of Browne’s intellectual interest, might not the science be amenable to bend, at times, in deference to Browne’s more fundamental philosophical principles, to a more general worldview which subsumed all else?

In his eclectic and all-encompassing intellectual ambition, to reflect on Browne’s scientific imagination is to necessarily reflect also on his artistic and philosophical imaginations. As Merton writes, “the dynamics of life in especial kindled Browne’s imagination. Reflection upon change and growth furnishes a *leitmotiv* which runs through his scientific as well as his artistic writings.”⁸⁰⁹ Browne’s writing itself cannot be dissociated from his understanding of science, for language too,

⁸⁰⁷ Egon Stephen Merton. *Op. cit.*, pp. 63-4.

⁸⁰⁸ *Idem*, p. 64.

⁸⁰⁹ Egon Stephen Merton. *Op. cit.*, p. 36.

and in particular the subject of onomastics, conforms to the development of beings. In *Religio Medici*, Browne plaintively describes the original language of things, set forth by God and used by Adam to give creatures their true names, underlining how their biological constituents make up not only a single being but also a single word:

The finger of God hath set an inscription upon all his workes, not graphicall or composed of Letters, but of their severall formes, constitutions, parts, and operations, which aptly joyned together doe make one word that doth expresse their natures. By these Letters God calls the Starres by their names, and by the Alphabet *Adam* assigned to every creature a name peculiar to its nature.⁸¹⁰

Rejecting the purely linguistic metaphysics of, for instance, the figure of the Kabbalist, natural philosophy and the work of the anatomist *are* the work of metaphysical philology and language.

The relevance of hieroglyphs in Browne's philosophy points also to the possibility of salvaging this original language of things. But if the hieroglyphical language devised by the Egyptians (which "might Adam well have spoken") could have served those ancients as "the best evasion" from "the confusion of Babel,"⁸¹¹ *Pseudodoxia* endeavours to show that the linguistic singularity is not anymore a conceivable goal. In its constant appeals to the careful distinction between different, but equally valid, modes of talking about things, hieroglyphs have become just another voice in the crowd. Whatever power to approach by language the true name of things humans might have once possessed, it is now irrevocably lost; our time is defined by biological and linguistic cacophony:

It is the common wonder of all men, how among so many millions of faces, there should be none alike; Now contrary, I wonder as much how there should be any; he that shall consider how many thousand severall words have beene carelesly and without study

⁸¹⁰ *Religio Medici*, pp. 72-3.

⁸¹¹ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 379.

composed out of 24 Letters; withall how many hundred lines there are to be drawn in the frabrick of one man; shall easily finde that this variety is necessary⁸¹²

Yet, the study of those variations and speciations of an original rubric of Creation can still be useful in our understanding of the rubric itself, and Browne does not find improbable the conceit that “at the confusion of tongues,” – that is, after Babel – “there was no constitution of a new speech in every family: but a variation and permutation of the old; out of one common language raising several Dialects: the primitive tongue still remaining intire.”⁸¹³ The aspiration to the simplicity of the singular truth is then, in the opening of *Pseudodoxia*, an idealistic warning but still a worthy aspirational goal:

We cannot condemn singularity. *Nos numerus sumus*, is the Motto of the multitude, and for that reason they are fools. For things as they recede from unity, the more they approach to imperfection and deformity; for they hold their imperfections in their Simplicities, and as they nearest approach unto God.⁸¹⁴

The gradual distancing from the “singularity” follows along a line traceable to the original word of God: from the true name of the divine writer, to the names of Adam the reader, to the errors of Man the *mis*reader but also decipherer. To study the multitude of things and the cacophonous discourse which surrounds them is to keep in mind that generation comprises a decay from the one to the many, both biological as well as linguistic. The subject of generation is both at the epicentre of the scientific concerns of *Pseudodoxia* as well as particularly amenable and transferable to the other major subject of the work: the dispensation and dispersion of truth and error.

A clear example of Browne’s seemingly deliberate scientific confounding and of his overlapping of biological and linguistic (de)generation can be found in the following list of questions concerning the nature of colour:

⁸¹² *Religio Medici*, p. 73.

⁸¹³ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 394.

⁸¹⁴ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 39.

Thus although a man understood the general nature of colours, yet were it no easie Problem to resolve, Why Grass is green? Why Garlick, Molyes and Porrets have white roots, deep green leaves, and black seeds? Why several docks and sorts of Rhubarb with yellow roots, send forth purple flowers? Why also from Lactary or milky plants which have a white and lacteous juyce dispersed through every part, there arise flowers blew and yellow? Moreover, beside the specifical and first digressions ordained from the Creation, which might be urged to salve the variety in every species; why shall the marvail of Peru produce its flowers or different colours, and that not once, or constantly, but every day, and variously?⁸¹⁵

Browne's questions are folded into technical considerations on biology ("a white and lacteous juyce dispersed through every part") or theological musings on the origins of variety ("digressions ordained from the Creation"). Crucially, however, it is the nature of variety and generation *which animates scientific inquiry itself*, as if the latter is bound to ask questions which follow the structure and logic of biological generation: questions arise where life arises. The logic and structure of Browne's discourse is the logic of his scientific understanding of biological generation. But above all such concerns must be the primacy of the ability to ask questions and to introduce strange subjects even when they, like the flowers of Peru, merely arrive as complications which neither science nor theology can satisfy.

Such methods and dilemmas, however, occur also where the subject is not strictly concerned with generation, but where scientific facts furnish rhetorical principles which can serve to structure a discourse on a variety of subjects. One example can be found in the two "Loadstone" chapters,⁸¹⁶ in which the rubric proposed by the simple header quickly 'generates' its various and diverse items in such a way as to accommodate a balance between scientific inquiry and Browne's own curiosity. It is well possible to describe the different kinds of relationships between the items in this entry and its rubric by the metaphor of Browne's understanding of generation. Like the Aristotelian Idea,

⁸¹⁵ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 461.

⁸¹⁶ *Pseudodoxia*, pp. 88-116.

some items are the manifestation of the abstract rubric, such as the experiments concerning the relationship between different metals and the loadstone, considerations on the orientation of magnetic currents, or even the relationship between garlic and the loadstone.

Other items, however, seem to depart from the rubric in a more radical way, being generated instead by the items which are already present: do the ashes of vegetables which grow on soil with mineral particles exhibit magnetic properties?; is the body of man magnetic and, if so, is it true that manned boats naturally turn to the North?; is the Moon magnetic? Such questions appear only tangentially related to the discussion on the loadstone; their presence is lent coherence by the rubric not as an idea that precedes the items, but something which all items already present serve to construct – a sort of alternative, emergent, rubric.

Finally, some of Browne's digressions seem, like spontaneous generation, to arrive out of nowhere, exhibiting no relation to their forebears. In the case of "*unguentum armarium*,"⁸¹⁷ for example, Browne himself says that "it belongs not to this discourse" before including it anyway – it is, indeed, "spontaneous," as is the question of whether if a portion of a man's flesh is grafted onto the body of another, does pricking the first elicit pain in the second. Both items are included in this list, and their coherence with the rubric is given not by the rubric, nor by the items, but by their own properties which the system changes to accommodate – in this case, Browne retroactively articulates the notion of sympathy with the notion of magnetism.

Incidentally, only preformation doctrine would be an irreconcilable idea within Browne's philosophy. Not because of its scientific underpinnings (although he argues against it, in letters, by relating a number of experiments) but because the gradual speciation and rigidity of this classification of the cosmos does neither suit nor reflect Browne's project and worldview. As the

⁸¹⁷ *Unguentum armarium*, or weapon salve, was a sympathetic medicine popular in the seventeenth-century. It consisted in the idea that weapon and wound were related, and that applying the remedy to the weapon could cure the wound. It was also proposed as a solution to the problem of determining longitude at sea: the vessel would carry a dog wounded by a knife left at shore. At the agreed upon time, the timekeeper would dip the knife into the preparation, and the dog's cries would allow the crew to know the time difference and calculate their position.

“loadstone” chapter shows, his encyclopaedia more often refuses to classify and welcomes instead its own form of cacophony. As West writes, against the loss of the original word,

Pseudodoxia undertakes to craft a vocabulary that permits ongoing discussion about the things of the world instead of requiring either complete agreement about them or complete dismissal of different descriptions of them.⁸¹⁸

Browne’s multifaceted understanding of ‘generation,’ allows him to unfold the rubric of “Truth.” Yet, insofar as the resulting items are repetitions of this very same rubric, they do not articulate a single “truth,” but reveal instead how the rubric of *Pseudodoxia* is polyhedral. Each of them being a metaphor for the rubric, they are less metaphors for truth than they are metaphors of *ways of knowing truth*. Lastly, a fourth category – besides the three composing his theory of generation – showcases this aspect of *Pseudodoxia* clearly, and brings further complexity into its list: the monster.

If Browne’s understanding of generation could accommodate a variety of beings, ways of understanding and talking about those beings or about any other subject which interested him, some beings and some things are, nevertheless, harder to fit within even such an eclectic and permissible scheme. The multiplication of the names of aspects of Truth – fragments of the original word-being – also engenders their own interstitial taboo, which in Browne is called the “monster.” Monstrosities were a favoured subject of natural philosophy: the study of beings which no scientific theory of biological generation could account for.⁸¹⁹ But ideas can also be monstrous: as Browne writes in the “Loadstone” chapter, “these conceits are of that *monstrosity* that they refute themselves in their recitements”⁸²⁰ – they are dead before they were ever alive, in rhetorical terms. Browne

⁸¹⁸ William N. West. *Op. cit.*, p. 181.

⁸¹⁹ The idea of the monster was crucial to natural philosophers concerned with generation. Explanations always hinted at the increasingly uneasy question of the relationship between God and Nature – His own creation and, yet, in such cases so at odds with beauty, order, and harmony. The debate addressed two distinct points. The first considered the possibility of Nature being somehow independent from the perfect will of God; the second concerned the reception of monsters and monstrosity, as Daston and Park write, divided among the affects of horror, pleasure, and disgust. For Browne, whose ambitions laid in a hopeful return to the singular divine, from a multiplicity which, nevertheless, was generated out of the original word, the ‘alien’ was always troublesome.

⁸²⁰ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 114.

considers dangerous errors and grave sins to be part of that monstrosity and, in *Pseudodoxia*, he consigns such taboos to the final chapter as if he himself was not sure of how to accommodate what his theory of generation seems to wish to leave out.

Browne's writings provide us with contradictory pronouncements on the nature of monstrosity. It is possible, in this case, that we might be before the maturation of his thought in tandem with the shifting tides of scientific and theological consensus in the seventeenth-century – a “transformation,” perhaps, “largely triggered by political and religious conflicts.”⁸²¹ Thus, in *Religio Medici*, Browne writes that “there are no Grotesques in nature,” since “there is no deformity but in monstrosity, wherein notwithstanding there is a kind of beauty.” He continues:

Now nature is not at variance with art, nor art with nature; they being both the servants of his providence: Art is the perfection of Nature: Were the world now as it was the sixth day, there were yet a Chaos: Nature hath made one world, and Art another. In briefe, all things are artificiall, for nature is the Art of God.⁸²²

Following Daston and Park, we can situate Browne's views in *Religio Medici* within a Mannerist or Baroque aesthetic which “saw monsters as works of art, awakening wonder in onlookers by their rarity and oddity, as well as by the ingenuity of their maker”⁸²³ – monstrosity as nature's sport.

In the context of a transition period for science and the arts (and their joint reception of monstrosity), Browne's maturing thought from his *juvenilia* to *Pseudodoxia* traced the tortuous path of the times. In the encyclopaedia, this shift in attitude arrives in the final chapter, dedicated to those things which the text should (or would have preferred to) leave out. “Of some relations whose truth we fear” consists of a list of taboos, such as necrophilia, the profanation of graves, or blasphemy (like using the eucharist to poison another person). Of these Browne writes:

⁸²¹ Lorraine Daston, Katharine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1150-1750*. New York: Zone Books, 1998, p. 208.

⁸²² *Religio Medici*, p. 26.

⁸²³ Lorraine Daston, Katharine Park. *Op cit.*, p. 210.

We desire no records of such enormities; sins should be accounted new, that so they may be deemed *monstrous*. They omit of monstrosity as they fall from their rarity; for, men count it veniall to err with their forefathers, and foolishly conceive they divide a sin in its society.⁸²⁴

This radically different view on monstrosity inscribes it in the category of error: neither horror nor pleasure, but disgust. Concerned with the dynamics and consequences of the propagation of errors, Browne echoes French anatomist Jean Riolan's connection between monstrosity and "the perversion of natural causes, the health of the people, and the authority of the king," anticipating also the general eighteenth-century view which divides the actions of God and Nature (blaming the latter and excusing the former) and worries about the extent that "disorderly nature could be used by disorderly people."⁸²⁵ If, as we have said, Browne's discourse often follows along the natural course of generation, a nature in disorder poses many problems, especially for someone concerned with the different ways people have of talking about things, and how a variety of discourses might hopefully be harmonised.

Blending in such a short excerpt distinct ideas about sin, knowledge, generation, and error, Browne's understanding of error as monstrous remains odd and contradictory in this last chapter. If sins can be regarded as venial due to widespread historical and social practice, and if their register runs the risk of trivialising them, where does this place the project of *Pseudodoxia* itself? The errors it registers often share those characteristics: they are historically inherited or widespread to such a degree that they become popular superstitious beliefs. It does not occur to Browne (or at the very least he does not show it) that the register of such mistakes in a publication with wide circulation could lead to an acceptance of them as less important. One might make the distinction on the basis that error is not sin: yet, Browne himself relates the two.

⁸²⁴ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 547.

⁸²⁵ Lorraine Daston, Katharine Park. *Op. cit.*, p. 208. Even if, in his defence of natural monstrosity in *Religio*, he already unfavourably compares it to social monstrosity, for men "confused together, make but one great beast, & a monstrosity more prodigious than Hydra." See *Religio Medici*, p. 71.

Pseudodoxia, however, is not really a text dedicated to the eradication of false beliefs, as we have argued before, and Browne's obsessive dedication to the register of such things is, instead, better understood in light of his project's true aims as being severely understated throughout the work. We have been approaching his articulation of the dynamics of biological generation with the discursive strategies employed in the description of the rubric 'Truth.' However, the stability of Truth is neither part of Browne's aim nor does it correspond with the implied dynamism of his list: as mentioned above, it might be the case that the content of the items of *Pseudodoxia* is less valuable than their metaphoric relation to the rubric as pertaining to the *epistemological process* of inquiring after truth and not truth itself as a stable quality. The rubric to which the items in *Pseudodoxia* correspond is rather 'systems of Truth,' or 'the social system of truth': how beliefs circulate, how errors propagate, how truth is a malleable thing which resists definite answers, and, finally, how even the unspeakably tabooed is inevitably named and must find accommodation in this complex epistemological landscape – if one is indeed attempting an honest description.

The split between other errors and those which are monstrous also has other effects on how it represents their role and placement within the sphere of communal knowledge. By claiming that such grave beliefs and practices are monstrous, Browne (in accordance with the seventeenth-century understanding of monstrosity) suggests that they are not really 'natural' in the biological sense, in the same way that the litany of theories concerning generation can be; spontaneous generation produces new a-paternal beings (the Aristotelian definition of monster referred to offspring who do not resemble their parents), but not *deformities* of the Creation – vermin are part of everyday life and experience. This essentially humanist gesture has the virtue of excusing the errors of the people: small errors can be understood as functioning within a diverse system of multiple (some of which false) authorities, while grave, sinful, errors inevitably arrive as outside deformities, strange to God's will and, ultimately, human morality.

This does not mean the excusal of such grave errors when they are practised; it simply excuses Browne's own register of such errors. In framing the question of monstrosity in such a way, Browne continues to present a theory of rhetoric modelled after biological generation, to which the visible connections between rubric and items (or Idea and parents, and offspring), and the sudden digressive 'spontaneous' swerves into something new, are now supplemented by the irruption of interstitial taboo, or the monstrous birth; all this in a single scientific and rhetorical system. The metaphorical connection between the rubric and its items presents a repetitive and exhaustively elaborated picture of the system by which error and truth are generated. They are double metaphors: they come to supplement the rubric of "Truth" by exemplifying its distinct expressions, but in their rhetorical development they constitute also mimetic representations of that very same rubric. If truth is not stable nor static, there is no better way to show it in its full complexity than performing this double-gesture, by which the item shows *what* the rubric is but also *how* it is.

A distancing effect from the rubric becomes a gesture of paramount importance: if the rubric 'Truth' could have served to present a classificatory guide in accordance with public morals, social norms, and religious orthodoxy, 'systems of Truth' offers, instead, inclusive moral relativism. In *Pseudodoxia* this artificial distance also arrives via an articulation of an 'other' whose autonomy excuses the writer, and the aesthetics of passive attention which further distances him from the items described.

In regards to attention, the focus on generation would naturally seem to suggest a preference for a passive acceptance of natural phenomena as they are and a dedicated effort to remain attentive to their development; to follow nature wherever it may lead requires first observing with no reservations where it actually leads. As such, a sort of pre-Enlightenment doctrine⁸²⁶ was already implicit in Browne's approach to the natural world, which, as Daston observes, positively insists on

⁸²⁶ "The sources and workings of the Enlightenment value and authority of nature in forms of cultivated experience, rather than in discursive legitimation." Lorraine Daston. "Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment." *The Moral Authority of Nature*. Lorraine Daston, Fernando Vidal (eds.). Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004, p. 101.

the naturalistic fallacy “whatever is, is right,” developing “highly elaborate modes of attention” to scientifically engage with the natural world. As we have illustrated in a prior section, Browne was indeed the kind of practitioner of those “modes of attention” that “beatified even the most inauspicious objects,” elevating the trivial to essential, and garnering “sharp criticism of contemporaries” along the way.⁸²⁷ This particular and delicate sensibility is evident in moments such as when, in a 1668 letter, Browne considers the “*musca tuliparum moschata* (...) a small bee-like flye of an excellent fragrant odour, which I have often found at the bottome of the flowers of Tulips.”⁸²⁸

The mode of passive attention is championed by Browne in areas beyond the scientific method: his theory of artistic images and our appreciation of them, for example, requires the suspension of preconceived moral, aesthetic, or scientific ideas. To all phenomena is afforded a limited subjective individuality by which *it* presents to us its own terms of engagement – it is the job of the natural philosopher to be attentive to these nuanced suggestions. Individual perception and projection of those preconceived notions are repeatedly refuted; the monstrosity of the centaur is not in the original creature but in the original observer:

Thus began the conceit and opinion of the Centaures: that is, in the mistake of the first beholders (...); when some young Thessalians on horseback were beheld afar off, while their horses watered, that is, while their heads, were depressed, they were conceived by the first Spectators, to be but one animal.⁸²⁹

The conjoining of distinct effects via false causality is, we recall, the result of Satan’s influence on the perception of reality. Naturally, the moral and intellectually rigorous natural philosopher should refrain from being tempted to ascribe meaning to things beyond their own presentation.

⁸²⁷ *Idem*, pp. 100-1.

⁸²⁸ Letter to Dr. Merrett, 24 December 1668.

⁸²⁹ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 32.

Satan is only one of the many actors articulated in *Pseudodoxia* whose actions manipulate the ‘systems of Truth’ and excuse the natural philosopher from leaving the position of passive observance. Besides the Adversary, there are the people, who contribute in their own way to the various constraints regarding the circulation of truths and falsehoods; the ancients, sometimes named, sometimes taken as emblems for a more general superstition related to bad reception of false *auctoritas*; Nature, whose actions and creations are elevated into autonomous reveries or “digressions”; or, finally, God Himself, the only one of these who is truly responsible for writing the “two books” which Browne tasks himself with reading and interpreting. Together, all are listed as the cast of *Pseudodoxia* in its first book.

Despite the profound reliance of Browne’s text on the hermeneutics of emblems and hieroglyphs, the ‘other’ in *Pseudodoxia* is less easily delineated, less prone to suggestion by graspable images than in *Moby-Dick*’s parade of metaphors for the whale. Yet, the rubric of the ‘systems of Truth’ calls, perhaps, for a more complex, even paradoxical, account of the items which are added onto the list in its light: a numerous cast of ‘others’ must gradually be revealed to be behind one item or another and in their collective actions engender a series of metaphors which can account for *Pseudodoxia*’s rubric in all its complexity. Browne, meanwhile, hides himself in the role of the attentive natural philosopher, whose words and rhetorical strategies are mere emulations of natural processes, and whose explicit efforts seek to show that a full account of his rubric must somehow foreground the taboo always hiding in the underbelly of the name.

Venice and Taboo

Two aspects weighing heavily on our analysis up to this point are rendered particularly explicit in *Invisible Cities*. On the one hand, each of the cities is explicitly named – no other work in our *corpus* attaches such value to the careful association between item and name, with Calvino

noting in a separate text how important it is for him to search for “a name that is the *true name*, the only name for that character”⁸³⁰ (that the cities are not only named but given female names⁸³¹ should also not pass unnoticed, and we return to this question by the end of this section). On the other hand, is the importance of taboo: despite the cloak of ritualistic taboo placed over *The Pillow Book* (largely unnoticed to a reader unfamiliar with its cultural significance), it is in *Invisible Cities* that it comes to the fore as a powerful force explicitly shaping language, memory, architecture, or literature. In the words of Marco Polo, taboo is met with shame and embarrassment: when speaking about Venice, the Khan is the first to name it, as if Polo could not (or would not) have done it himself – the bowing of the head connoting the aversion and even sacrality of that which has been deemed taboo:

“There is still one of which you never speak.”

Marco Polo bowed his head.

“Venice,” the Khan said.”

Polo articulates his reasons for the omission in terms of the degrading quality of addressing the name-as-taboo. By relating it to the enumeration of the cities, he also expresses the belief that the technique of naming as a technique of listing can have such an effect: “Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once,” he says, “if I speak of it. Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it, little by little.”⁸³² The unwillingness or impossibility of addressing Venice might as well be another driving force behind the enumeration of cities:

Marco Polo imagined answering (or Kublai Khan imagined his answer) that the more one was lost in unfamiliar quarters of distant cities, the more one understood the other cities he had crossed to arrive there; and he retraced the stages of his journeys, and he came to

⁸³⁰ Italo Calvino. “Characters and Names.” *The Written World and the Unwritten World: Collected Non-Fiction*. London: Penguin Books, 2023, p. 7.

⁸³¹ This concerned the majority of cases but it is not the rule: Beersheba, for example, is a real city.

⁸³² *Invisible Cities*, p. 78.

know the port from which he had set sail, and the familiar places of his youth, and the surroundings of home, and a little square of Venice where he gamboled as a child.⁸³³

The ensuing disquieting effect of which Massin writes (that variation is both difference and repetition) leads Polo, in another excerpt of his report, to say exactly the same thing as in the comment on losing Venice by saying something completely different: “perhaps I have already spoken of Irene under other names; perhaps I have spoken only of Irene.”⁸³⁴ Item and rubric, Irene and Venice, slowly overlap.

In effect, Polo’s journey is one of anxious accumulation, whose ultimate goal would be to reduce all the cities to the rubric which animates his voyages and imagination. The character echoes the author’s sentiments in this regard, as Calvino expresses them in his lectures:

Conciseness is only one aspect of the subject I want to deal with, and I will confine myself to telling you that I dream of immense cosmologies, sagas, and epics all reduced to the dimensions of an epigram. (...) I would like to edit a collection of tales consisting of one sentence only, or even a single line.⁸³⁵

Calvino’s proposal in *Invisible Cities* goes further, suggesting that it is possible to reduce all of it to a single word. The relationship between the city of Venice as the rubric of *Invisible Cities* and its cities as *degraded names* for the ‘true’ name is further evinced by the word Calvino chooses to refer to them: each object invoked by Polo to signify a city is a “logogriph.”⁸³⁶ Suggestively similar to “hieroglyph,” a logogriph is a word puzzle; not mystical, merely combinatorial. Usually appearing in the guise of a poem, each line of the logogriph is a clue to a different word – the letters of these

⁸³³ *Invisible Cities*, p. 24.

⁸³⁴ *Invisible Cities*, p. 113.

⁸³⁵ Italo Calvino. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1985-86*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 51.

⁸³⁶ *Invisible Cities*, p. 19.

words are, when grouped together, an anagram for the final answer⁸³⁷ – and knowledge of the final answer requires gathering all the words (usually segments of the answer) together and shuffling them into new combinations.

The clues to the logogriph's relationship with the final answer are slightly distinct from the relationship between the components of the hieroglyph and the thing it refers to. Similarly, the theme of taboo and the 'other' in *Invisible Cities* is different from the previous cases. In Calvino's text, taboo becomes not solely a question pertaining to the nature of the rubric itself (although "Venice" does have this taboo-like quality) but, like in the logogriph, it is just as present in each of the items. A great number of the cities described by Polo have their own taboos and are defined by them: underworlds, the dead, invisible inhabitants, ghosts, criminals, etc. The world conjured by Calvino is one where a strange 'other' lies always perched just at the edge of expression, not just from the perspective of the narrator but, more importantly, from the point-of-view of its inhabitants. Just as the Khan intimated, each city is but an emblem of something else, but this emblematic quality often refers to two categories: on the one hand, to the possible rubrics of "Empire" or "Venice," and to the hidden or 'underbelly' quality of the individual cities on the other.

A number of the categories devised by Calvino for the novel's structure point in this direction: "hidden cities," "cities & names," "cities & the dead," "cities & signs," etc. The city of Leandra has "gods of two species," the Penates and the Lares, among which the question of who is the "true essence of the city" results in a never-ending debate. Closer to the taboo of vermin, decay, and uncleanness is Theodora, the city where a "forgotten fauna," unbeknownst to the inhabitants, is coming back to life among the city's blind spots, such as "capitals and drainpipes," or the "sleeper's

⁸³⁷ The following puzzle, offered as an example, is taken from the magazine *The Masquerade, A Collection of New Enigmas. Logogriphs, Charades, Rebusses, Queries, and Transpositions*. The correct answer for each line is in brackets, with the last line being the final answer. Naturally, such puzzles lend themselves to being presented in list form: "What to the king alone pertains; (regal) / And what respect in gen'ral gains; (age) / A title English nobles bear; (earl) / And what a farmer's horses wear; (gear) / What fictitious ne'er can be; (real) / With what betokens poverty; (rag) / A word that has an angry cast; (rage) / Another, that we use for last; (lag) / What in a dish of souse is good; (ear) / A limb, when lost, supply'd with wood; (leg) / A wind, of brisk yet gentle fame; (gale) / A Yorkshire river's ancient name; (are) / And 'last, not least,' the spacious whole / Will lead you to the wish'd-for-goal. (large)"

bedside.” Or the city of Moriana, a city of two halves, which “has no thickness, it consists only of a face and an obverse, like a sheet of paper, with a figure on either side, which can neither be separated nor look at each other.”⁸³⁸ Such cities call attention to this obverse, the ‘underbelly,’ of reality, whose writing always makes itself accompanied by an ‘other’ writing. As Dani Cavallaro observes,

By drawing attention to spaces of darkness and disorder, Calvino prompts us to acknowledge *the taboo as an object not only of revulsion but also of fascination*. If many contemporary theorizations of the metropolis tend to obliterate the tenebrous and inscrutable territories which stretch indefinitely within the city’s boundaries, *Invisible Cities* seeks to multiply the murky realms embedded within the urban tapestry. Death, decay and corruption, squalid and malodorous subterranean spaces, *grotesque* shapes, ailing bodies, vermin and waste coexist with the intoxicating radiance of the bridges and balconies, balustrades and stained-glass windows, domes and fountains, precious stones and glimmering reflections of architectural dreams⁸³⁹

If Leandra, Theodora, and Moriana acknowledge the existence of another (hidden) side, other cities go beyond mere acknowledgement, suggesting that attempts to identify the ‘obverse’ of something, to regard it with fascination rather than disgust, is a project which leads to confusion. Eusapia, for instance, has a hidden underground city in which its dead are organised and displayed by a secret group. In time, which Eusapia is more real – which of them possesses the vital force keeping the visible side of the city going – becomes a difficult question to solve:

The living, to keep up with them [the dead] also want to do everything that the hooded brothers tell them about the novelties of the dead. So the Eusapia of the living has taken to copying its underground copy. (...) They say that this has not just now begun to happen: actually it was the dead who built the upper Eusapia, in the image of their city.

⁸³⁸ *Invisible Cities*, pp. 70, 144, 95.

⁸³⁹ Dani Cavallaro. *The Mind of Italo Calvino: A Critical Exploration of His Thought and Writings*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2010. p. 78. My emphasis.

They say that in the twin cities there is *no longer any way of knowing who is alive and who is dead*.⁸⁴⁰

Eudoxia's Delphic oracle, when asked about the "mysterious bond" between the carpet and the city, replies that one "has the form the gods gave the starry sky and the orbits in which the worlds revolve; the other is an approximate reflection, like every human creation"⁸⁴¹ – but which is which is left for debate. Slightly different is Beersheba, which has two mirror cities: a celestial one, "where the city's most elevated virtues and sentiments are poised," and an underground one, a "receptacle of everything base and unworthy" which the inhabitants curate as taboo by virtue of a "constant care to erase from the visible Beersheba every tie or resemblance to the lower twin." Yet, this is only a misconception of the inhabitants, since the celestial city is itself filled with rubbish, "cast-off things," while the underground city is the one "designed by the most authoritative architects."⁸⁴² Or the city of Leonia, surrounded by a landfill of its own discarded items – gathered by street cleaners "surrounded by a respectful silence, like a ritual that inspires devotion"⁸⁴³ –, but increasingly threatened to be submerged by them.

In a 1985 text on nineteenth-century fantastic literature, Calvino connects the narrative impulse in this genre with the doubled quality of the cities where it prefers to set its stories:

Old cities in which the medieval and Renaissance past, dense with crimes and mysteries, is indissolubly interwoven with everyday life seem built purposely to suggest that doubling of reality which sets off the narrative mechanism of this literary genre.⁸⁴⁴

In *Invisible Cities*, the double is always where the city is most alive: in the context of this wide array of modes of urban organisation and living, the metaphor of decay becomes all the more clear as referring to a hidden vital force *growing* in its interstices. A vital force often taking the form of

⁸⁴⁰ *Invisible Cities*, p. 99. My emphasis.

⁸⁴¹ *Invisible Cities*, pp. 86-7.

⁸⁴² *Invisible Cities*, pp. 100-1.

⁸⁴³ *Invisible Cities*, pp. 102-3.

⁸⁴⁴ Italo Calvino. "The Fantastic in Italian Literature." *The Written World and the Unwritten World: Collected Non-Fiction*. London: Penguin Books, 2023, p. 239.

beings beyond human experience and domesticity: fungi, vermin (such as the wormwood, which lives in the interstices of the wood), mythological creatures, angels, ghosts, etc.

Such vitality nourishes, in the end, not only the inhabitants of each city but Polo himself since, by repeatedly foregrounding the tabooed city – and spinning tales of how this taboo inches closer to everyday life and might, in time, replace it – Marco Polo continues to advance the therapeutic work related to his melancholy project and the recovery of childhood Venice. By shining a light on what lives in the interstices and blind spots of the city, he hopes to reveal the taboo of a living Venice similarly hiding in the interstices of his own list. “The spaces of disjunction between the rows and the columns of the data entries,” writes M. C. Boyer, “represent the forgotten spaces, the disavowed places.”⁸⁴⁵ Unlike Thomas Browne, whose ambiguous refusal to accept the monstrous grounds his listing project (even if this is an ambiguous and tentative gesture), Polo’s requires the reframing of the tabooed monstrous as part of the everyday.

As Leach observed, a way to understand taboo in relation to naming concerns precisely the inadvertent creation of in-between spaces which ground the action of naming itself. In *Invisible Cities*, Calvino explicitly opens his items by giving them names and then focusing on the interstices that operations of other cultural techniques – such as urbanisation or cartography – consign to a perceptual blind spot. All these taboos, however, are inscribed inside the name of each city, subtly seeking to remediate the inevitable exclusion of those in-between spaces from the category-making of naming operations. The item, in *Invisible Cities*, always includes what is outside the item.

Bringing together such themes – the nature of the name, a concern with boundaries or lack thereof, taboo as the object of fascination –, we find in *Invisible Cities*, in accordance with its medievalist setting, a similar sense of the tension and transition described by Mikhail Bakhtin in his

⁸⁴⁵ M. C. Boyer *apud* Dani Cavallaro. *Op. cit.*, p. 77.

study of the Rabelaisian carnivalesque – between the classical canon of the representation of the body and the radically distinct tradition of medieval grotesque realism.⁸⁴⁶ The latter, writes Bakhtin,

ignores the closed, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths. Mountains and abysses, such is the relief of the grotesque body; or speaking in architectural terms, towers and subterranean passages. (...) The outward and inward features are often merged into one.⁸⁴⁷

Bakhtin's passing reference to architectonical features calls attention to suggestive parallels between his analysis and the reading of Calvino's cities. As in the Cavallaro excerpt quoted above, these too are places where "squalid and malodorous subterranean spaces, *grotesque* shapes, ailing bodies, vermin and waste coexist with the intoxicating radiance of the bridges and balconies, balustrades and stained-glass windows, domes and fountains." In a novel so attuned to the delineation, and then dissipation, of binary and dual categories, Polo's role as an explorer reveals how the tabooed interior is not so easily separated from the classically pure world of surfaces, which can also be conceived as pertaining to the exploration of the carnivalesque sensibility and the grotesque, in the sense which Bakhtin gives it.

Lists, as Bakhtin's work displays thoroughly (for it cannot but analyse in this vein the many lists of Rabelais) are well suited to representations of this mode of the excessive, of the voracious inability to contain and separate the inside from the outside. A similar rehearsal of the Rabelaisian grotesque list is also present in *Invisible Cities* (although more restrained): each of the descriptions of Beersheba's two cities, for example, has its own list, "the underground city has overturned rubbish bins, with cheese rinds, greasy paper, fish scales, dishwater, uneaten spaghetti, old bandages spilling from them," and the celestial city is "a planet aflutter with potato peels, broken umbrellas, old socks, candy wrappings, paved with tram tickets, fingernail-cuttings and pared calluses,

⁸⁴⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984, pp. 28-9.

⁸⁴⁷ *Idem*, p. 318.

eggshells.”⁸⁴⁸ The final sentence – “Beersheba, a city which, only when it shifts, is not miserly, calculating, greedy” – completes the grotesque play.

It is perhaps also with the assistance of Bakhtin’s reading that we can more fruitfully read the gender divide between the female cities and male explorer-ruler pair. Without going too much into detail, the anatomy of female bodies, as well as an obsession with other forms of boundary-breaking such as pregnancy, is another main focus of Rabelais’ text according to Bakhtin. In light of their characterisation as female entities – that is, also as *bodies* (or embodiments) explored by Polo – the Venetian’s role could be understood as that of the oppressive male’s incursion into the female city-body (to momentarily adopt the language of a possible gender-focused methodology), if not for his emphatic refusal to take any kind of action even if that action would have been confined to a mode of perception. In this sense, what interests us is how, as in Bakhtin’s account of the aesthetic of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, all such aspects converge in a project of scrambling of reality which results from Polo’s preferred mode of perception. What truly cements his project as a project of the grotesque and the carnivalesque is the comparison to the Khan’s more classically-minded project of *order*. Polo’s arrival at court ends up being just as disturbing and liberating as the arrival of Carnival upon Lent, as the refusal to take orders and arrive at settled categories is also what distinguishes Polo from the previous diplomats and explorers. If both the project of naming the cities (which could contribute to the elaboration of one of the Khan’s atlases) and the general header categories given by Calvino used to classify them could delineate regions of taboo, the foregrounding of this very same interstitial place of the extra-real and the suggestion it might overcrowd and invade the named-real continuously define an overpowering Other: Venice.

The refusal to accept and impose a segmented reality leads him instead to adopt the posture of the passive observer or, once again, a practitioner of restrained *attention*, an attitude distinguishing him from the Khan and the inhabitants of the cities. The first, although he listens “to the young

⁸⁴⁸ *Invisible Cities*, pp. 100-1.

Venetian with greater *attention* and curiosity,”⁸⁴⁹ is far too enmeshed in the ordering project, getting visibly frustrated with Polo’s active reluctance to categorise and classify. The latter live *in* the cities described by Polo, and it is this ability to see and describe what the inhabitants of the city are blind to (we can refer back to the swallow example) that marks him also as an ‘attendant.’

In the context of Polo’s relationship to the world and the ability to describe it, there is a tendency to subsume his position as parallel to that of the author, as a figure of postmodern literature and its concerns. As John Welsh writes, for example,

Marco Polo (...) negates the possibility of perceiving the world from a universal, “innocent” perspective. (...) Marco Polo is unable to see the world, unable to assign value to things except in reference to a concept of home. (...) Calvino the mature postmodernist has begun to worry about the possibility of expressing or even accessing any reality that exists beyond the self.⁸⁵⁰

But it is hardly sufficient to underline the struggles recognised and explored by Calvino and Polo without addressing their counter-proposal. The solution is precisely to adopt a point-of-view that allows for a distancing act which nevertheless remains in a state of profound attention:

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.⁸⁵¹

Polo’s final words – the final words of the novel – reject the two positions described above: that of the inhabitants and the Khan as figures too grounded in the world. Yet, they also present something very close to attention. The mode of engagement favoured by Polo requires a passive non-

⁸⁴⁹ *Invisible Cities*, p. 5.

⁸⁵⁰ John Welsh. “Erasing the Invisible Cities: Italo Calvino and the Violence of Representation.” *Working Papers in Romance languages* 1.2 (2008), p. 11.

⁸⁵¹ *Invisible Cities*, p. 148.

involvement (“constant vigilance,” “apprehension,” “learn to recognise”) which has the goal of letting things suggest their own identity to the observer, whose main task is to allow them to flourish, to “make them endure, give them space.”

The cities of *Invisible Cities* are perhaps meaningless without the rubric around which they orbit. At the moment when Polo explains to Khan that in order “to distinguish the other cities’ qualities, [he] must speak of a first city that remains implicit,”⁸⁵² Venice begins to arise almost as Ishmael’s shadowy other, threatening to consume and render pointlessly interchangeable all language surrounding it. If all the cities are incomplete, unsatisfactory, metaphors for Venice, the real Venice is not exhausted by any lists about it. Yet, the repetition inherent to the unfolding of the rubric is transcended by Polo’s refusal to let the taboo resulting from that very same unfolding hide in a blind spot.

The collapse of boundaries does have a pernicious side-effect: as we mentioned before, Kublai’s and Polo’s identities also begin to merge together, losing in the process that crucial variation which, in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, kept everyone’s individuality intact. More than in any other work, however, *Invisible Cities* is fully and self-destructively committed to its ideals: after all, if one cannot put everything clearly into view, the logograph’s answer is forever lost.

⁸⁵² *Invisible Cities*, p. 78.

IV. Two Concluding Remarks

Mr. Bond, they have a saying in Chicago. Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. The third time it's enemy action.

— Ian Fleming, *Goldfinger*

In this final section, I wanted to leave some general thoughts on lists and listing, addressing two questions to which the thesis has been directed and has not yet given a formalised answer or, at the very least, understanding if we can refine these views in light of the various points made before: what is a list, what is a list for? As we have seen, lists can be many things, much beyond what this work could consider, and they serve many purposes. Yet, if we take seriously the initial proposal – the list as a mode of understanding – underlying all subsequent analyses, there must be something akin to a common purpose or function that unites all that we have said and offers a partial and tentative description of this mode. In this ‘open’ conclusion, we leave some suggestions.

These short concluding remarks will touch on two topics. The first comprises the invisible thread which ties together a number of the reflections from the previous chapters: the issue of de-authoralisation and the ambiguous role of the list-maker in the process of listing. The second has only been hinted at discreetly: it is the role of metaphor in the list and the possibility that the meaning-making capabilities of lists are deeply connected to the workings of metaphor. These two ideas come together in a single proposition: that lists provide a frame to ‘hand off’ the metaphorical process to those who encounter them; that they are, in this sense, *laboratories of metaphors*.

An Invitation to Dance

Throughout the chapters and sections, we have discreetly harped a common chord that we have hitherto passed over in silence. In the first chapter, on the list and the technique of counting,

we underlined the distancing effects of de-authoralisation of the natural digressiveness of listing practices, and how these were deployed for a variety of ends. Afterwards, we described how the diagrammatic effect of the list posits, nevertheless, an observant author resting at its centre, around whom all the items orbit, and to whom the willingness to exhibit the kind of individuality that precludes the act of choosing one option out of many must still give way to the balanced distance which allows for all choices to be permanently and equally available. Finally, in regards to the technique of naming, we framed these two different analyses within the context of the relational aspects of passive attention: how it is indispensable for the ability to furnish a name for listed things while balancing the naming act with taboo.

The thread linking all such analysis is the negotiated effect of presence or absence of the author, of their distance or proximity to the things which they list. This ambiguous role of the one who lists results in definitions such as Sève's: "la liste pourrait être ainsi définie : un texte dont l'auteur ou le producteur s'est retiré."⁸⁵³ "Toute se passe," he adds, "paradoxalement comme si le lecteur de la liste était responsable de l'effet d'énonciation,"⁸⁵⁴ an observation which Turin describes as "centrale dans l'étude de cette forme."⁸⁵⁵ As the emphatic recurrence of this theme suggests, such processes of 'handing-off' cannot be regarded as mere personal impositions by the list-makers – nor are they received as such by their readers. When he writes that "la liste, une fois « lancée » dans une certaine direction, tend à se prolonger toute seule,"⁸⁵⁶ Sève implies, on the contrary, that it is somehow a natural tendency of list forms to be 'handed-off'. And Turin goes further, calling it one of the list's "affordances":

⁸⁵³ Bernard Sève. *Op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁸⁵⁴ *Idem*, p. 97.

⁸⁵⁵ Gaspard Turin. "Actualité de la Liste." *Acta Fabula* 14.4 (May 2013). <fabula.org/acta/document7864.php>.

⁸⁵⁶ Bernard Sève. *Op. cit.*, p. 38.

la liste, en milieu littéraire, engage à des pratiques plus proches de l'écriture que de la lecture. Lire la liste, c'est paradoxalement se soumettre à une liberté – faire valoir ce pouvoir de lecture trop souvent oublié, celui de la création.⁸⁵⁷

This, we have argued, might be part of the explanation as to why the list form was chosen to address certain topics in the first place. Indeed, we have attested to many such effects for a variety of reasons. We might argue, for example, that political motives ground this 'handing-off' of hermeneutic (and even authorial) responsibility in Shōnagon or Browne's text. The reader, in those cases, must make the dangerous part of the journey alone. Accordingly, the other 'dangers' we identified in the case of Flaubert, Melville, or Calvino's text are also significant or complex enough to warrant a frequent invitation by the texts for the reader to become their writer. One could rejoin that this is not a particularity of lists, but of literature in general, according to certain theories of reception studies, for example, of Stanley Fish or Julia Kristeva, upon which Turin has eloquently elaborated in his thesis.⁸⁵⁸

Still, as Turin explains, something is afoot in the list which makes the subject rather more complex. One often feels, in the list, that the freedom afforded to its reader is not merely hermeneutical, prosodical, or of filling in the "points of indeterminacy" of Roman Ingarden,⁸⁵⁹ but to enlarge the list, to supply new items. We could also ask whether this is not inevitable given the multitude of processes we examined: once the list becomes a vehicle to de-hierarchise all its elements and indeed revel in their trivial interchangeability, once it shows how arbitrary acts of circumscription can invite the whole cosmos to take part in it, once it gradually erases even the responsibility of the list-maker from a process of identity building artfully placed 'outside' of the list, then, how could the reader not feel as if the list is fully open to them?

⁸⁵⁷ Gaspard Turin. "Affordances de la Liste: À Quoi la Lecture de Liste Engage-t-Elle Son Lecteur?" *Idem*, p. 165.

⁸⁵⁸ Gaspard Turin. *Entre hybris et mélancolie: poétique, esthétique et usages de la liste littéraire dans le roman français contemporain (1963-2013)*. 2014. Université de Lausanne. PhD Dissertation. *Serval: serveur académique lausannois*. <serval.unil.ch/resource/serval:BIB_B3266248B812.P001/REF>, pp. 196-7.

⁸⁵⁹ Roman Ingarden. *A Obra de Arte Literária*. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1979, pp. 269-77.

To go a little further, one might even consider that this effect is not exclusive to the written list (and thus depending on, as Goody observed, the ability of the reader to master and take control of the written text) but present in oral lists as well. It is this ‘natural tendency’ or ‘affordance’ of list forms which Sève has in mind when we writes of their role in public speaking, in which “le vrai sujet de l’énonciation n’est pas celui qui déclame (...) Ce vrai sujet n’est pas une personne physique, situable et mortelle ; c’est une personne métaphysique, la communauté.”⁸⁶⁰ This suspicion is supported by a very different kind of inquiry into the role of lists in an oral context, namely, of the political or argumentative variety. J. Maxwell Atkinson underlines this communal function of lists, writing that, in public speaking, lists are “a versatile way of packaging boasts about ‘us’ or insults aimed at ‘them’.”⁸⁶¹ More pertinently, he also considers that lists are concerned with the production of utterances “in unison” – a case that is all the more significant as we return to the issue in the last chapter on the minimum amount of items that is required for a list to be recognised as such. Atkinson considers that three is this minimum:

One of the main attractions of three-part lists is that they have an air of unity of completeness about them. Lists comprising only two items tend to appear inadequate or incomplete – so much so that there are various phrases that can be slotted in whenever we are having difficulty in finding a suitable third item for a list. (...) ‘and so on’, ‘something or other’, ‘thingummyjig’, ‘whatchumacallit’ and ‘etcetera’. On their own, they are empty categories which do not refer to anything directly, and their main function seems to be to provide us with an all-purpose and readily available solution to the problem of completing a list.⁸⁶²

“People tend to treat the completion of the third item in a list,” he summarises, “as the point where a next utterance should begin.”⁸⁶³ The overlaps between Sève, Turin, and Atkinson’s analyses suggest a quality of the paradigmatic meaning-making of lists that transcends the separation between orality

⁸⁶⁰ Bernard Sève. *Op. cit.*, p. 97-8.

⁸⁶¹ J. Maxwell Atkinson. *Op. cit.*, pp. 57-8.

⁸⁶² *Idem*, pp. 57-8.

⁸⁶³ *Idem*, p. 59.

and writing.⁸⁶⁴ More importantly, they suggest that this paradigmatic quality is dependent on this process of authorial transfer: the reader (or hearer) of the list, suggest Turin, Sève, or Atkinson, is not bothered by its encroaching into their own set of responsibilities, but rather embraces it – the list is born authorless, and its paradigmatic dimension is always collective.

The texts in our *corpus* offer ample evidence of this process of de-authoralisation, addressing the reader more or less directly and laying the responsibility on the latter to pursue the text to its ‘natural’ conclusion. In *Moby-Dick*, in “The Affidavit,” for instance, Ishmael opens the chapter by adopting a rather defensive posture, explaining why he rejects narrative and what he, in turn, expects from the reader of the list which replaces it:

I care not to perform this part of my task methodically; but shall be content to produce the desired impression by separate citations of items, (...) and from these citations, I take it—the conclusion aimed at will naturally follow of itself.⁸⁶⁵

That such can happen “naturally” can only be a hopeful statement, despite Ishmael’s confidence, relying on the particular “affordances” of his chosen mode of discourse. And while we have attempted to show how these processes of meaning-making take place within the context of the list (how they are, in other words, “natural”), it is nevertheless remarkable that in the more paraenetical sections of *Moby-Dick*, the structure of the three-item list is deployed to guide the transition from separate items to a conclusion which is never clarified but simply demanded and expected ‘naturally’ from the reader – the following excerpt is an illustration of a similar phenomenon as described in Atkinson:

Consider the subtleness of the sea; (...) Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes (...). Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism

⁸⁶⁴ Empirical research suggests, in any case, that the tendency to focus either on the last-presented item or on the whole picture is more dependent on the nature and context of the task at hand than on predetermined disposition, or, “differing attentional post-encoding processes take place during brief pauses in between the memory items under differing task demands.” See Evie Vergauwe, Timothy J. Ricker, Naomi Langerock, and Nelson Cowan. “What do people typically do between list items? The nature of attention-based mnemonic activities depends on task context.” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 45.5 (2019), pp. 779-94.

⁸⁶⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p. 221.

of the sea; (...) Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself?⁸⁶⁶

Melville's choice of words is telling. The first item is the simplest in grammatical terms, but the second already calls for an "also" which initiates the accumulative and additive motion of this short list. Finally, the third exhibits a consciousness of the effort required in parsing things presented sequentially without explanation ("once more") which sounds almost like a concealed "please be patient" or "bear with me." This enumeration is a lesson on how lists of this kind are to be read. The third item rehearses a final push into the kind of rhetoric upon which the list depends, after which it is assumed that the reader will have understood and mastered it well enough to be able to "consider all" with no further instructions; to exit the text and look now at himself and the world, taking the list into their own hands.

Similarly, more subtly, Browne considers the relationship between his own text and the reader's responsibility right at the opening of *Pseudodoxia*, addressing the reader directly in the section (tellingly titled) "To the Reader." Here, the potentially disappointed reader of *Pseudodoxia* is asked not "destroy" Browne's failures but "establish his own" – "to explain and dilucidate, to add and amplate," to provide answers and counterarguments to which he will, as he makes clear, "not contentiously rejoin."⁸⁶⁷ Of course, Browne himself made copious revisions and additions to the text of *Pseudodoxia*, resulting in six editions in the span of only twenty-eight years. Yet, the text eventually comes to an end, just as the editions. But the fact that the authority of authorship bestowed upon the author has now been transferred to the reader is partly attested to by the postscript added by the printer of *Pseudodoxia* in its final incarnation:

Readers, to inform you of the advantages of the present impression, and disabuse your expectations of any future enlargements; — these are to advertise you, that this edition

⁸⁶⁶ *Moby-Dick*, p. 299.

⁸⁶⁷ *Pseudodoxia*, p. 6.

comes forth with very many explanations, additions, and alterations throughout, besides that of one entire chapter; and now this work is compleat and perfect, expect no further additions.⁸⁶⁸

Browne continued to collect material for further revisions of *Pseudodoxia* but they were never published. Pairing the two quotes together – Browne’s and the printer’s – there remains the suggestion that, if Browne’s own exhortation was somewhat undercut by repeated revisions, the closing of the text signalled by the postscript revives that very same appeal with full credulity. It shows how the presentation of a ‘closed’ list, “compleat and perfect,” is merely a suggestion for the reader to take up the mantle of the writer. Browne’s own admittance of not denying readerly “ampliations” underlines *Pseudodoxia*’s communal character: “I intend no Monopoly,” he had written in *Religio Medici*, “but a Community in learning.”⁸⁶⁹

Browne’s text shares with *Bouvard* and *The Pillow Book* a deep concern for the utterances of their respective societies and of certain communities therein. They collect things that could be said by anyone and everyone, albeit with sharply distinct goals in mind. Of Flaubert, we have often remarked – seemingly contradictorily – how *Bouvard* seems to be a description of the gradual identification between Flaubert, writer and researcher, and his literary creations. Yet, underlying this process is the ideal of a novel produced by copying from sources that constitute the communal and commonplace knowledge of nineteenth-century French society and in which the author slowly reduces his own individual mark. Let us not forget, additionally, that *Bouvard* was meant to be capped by the *Dictionnaire*: the single creative act of literature (or anything) supposedly produced by the two friends, and nothing less than a summary of things that their intellectually unremarkable community can utter together (even as if they are unaware that their individual statements have no traces of individuality). *Bouvard* not only asks readers to take up the mantle of writing but it

⁸⁶⁸ Thomas Browne. *Sir Thomas Browne’s Works: Including his Life and Correspondence*. Vol 2. Simon Wilkins (ed.). London: William Pickering, 1835, p. 182. This postscript is not included in the Keynes’ version of *Pseudodoxia*. It was included in the 1686 edition (four years after Browne’s death), and is quoted here from the 1835 edition by Simon Wilkins.

⁸⁶⁹ *Religio Medici*, p. 74.

condescendingly shows how its readers were already its writers. *The Pillow Book* is closest to *Bouvard* in this regard, and its elegiac tone is often as sniggering as that of Flaubert: “I also find it fascinating that things like this can utterly fail to delight others,” “I longed to recite this poem to them (...) but I knew this would go right past their little ears too.”⁸⁷⁰ Such remarks are less Shōnagon’s personal judgement than they are the condensed expression of a particular group’s aesthetic tastes, the ‘us versus them’ communal dimension of political lists.

Similar dynamics are at work in *Invisible Cities*, which Cavallaro describes as “an adventure of meticulous decoding where the reader, no less than the narrator and the narratee, is called upon to exercise his or her skills as a creative writer.”⁸⁷¹ In Calvino’s work, there is never a direct appeal to the reader to receive the responsibility for the list.⁸⁷² However, and particularly in light of Polo and the Khan’s reflection and performance of the dissolution of individual identity, this question of authorship is rehearsed again and again in fictional episodes, for example, when the Khan demands to be the one describing cities he has never seen and Polo to confirm that they are real. Towards the end of the text, Polo directly addresses the reader’s world, first by referring to his real-life counterpart’s circumstances of imprisonment and then by cataloguing real cities as he leafs through the Khan’s atlas: Mexico, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Osaka, and so on – cities which the reader, and not Polo nor the Khan, know; cities which only the reader can add as items to Polo’s list, if the invitation is taken up. If *Invisible Cities* has served for its readers to reflect on their own urban lives, it is only because the invitation of the list is always open, and never prescriptive. The communal nature of the project as well as the ‘handing-off’ process had been described earlier by Polo:

“I speak and speak,” Marco says, “but the listener retains only the words he is expecting. The description of the world to which you lend a benevolent ear is one thing; the description that will go the rounds of the groups of stevedores and gondoliers on the street

⁸⁷⁰ *The Pillow Book*, p. 130.

⁸⁷¹ Dani Cavallaro. *Op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁸⁷² This is, however, the case in other works by Calvino, such as *If On a Winter’s Night a Traveller*.

outside my house the day of my return is another; and yet another, that which I might dictate late in life, if I were taken prisoner by Genoese pirates and put in irons in the same cell with a writer of adventure stories. It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear.⁸⁷³

We do not mean here to exhaustively go over all such cases and examples and repeat previous analyses. The distinct techniques which comprise the technique of listing, as we have endeavoured to show, all concur to various processes of de-authoralisation – to the community of readers envisioned by the authors of each of these texts is proposed the co-creation of their lists.

But some rules to this game still apply. The relationship between rhythm and the list is one of “alternance de sens,” Turin explains, between the items and the rubric or, as he summarises it “la cadence est répétition, le rythme est changement, et la liste se conçoit dans une forme à la fois répétitive et changeante.”⁸⁷⁴ In the context of rhythm which allows the hearer to say the third item in unison with the speaker,⁸⁷⁵ we might conceive it, as Roger Scruton does in his essay on group dancing, not just as “a matter of diving time into repeatable units” but “a matter of organising it into a form of movement, so that one note invites the next into the space that it has vacated.”⁸⁷⁶ This “invitation” extends to the reader once the retiring author engenders a vacancy which must be occupied, but the tune to which they must dance was never – for all the appearance of arbitrariness present in the list – arbitrary in the first place. The reader is never on their own; the list provides, as Sève suggests, “un mode singulier et privilégié d’énonciation dialogique,”⁸⁷⁷ but never a monologue.

⁸⁷³ *Invisible Cities*, p. 123.

⁸⁷⁴ Gaspard Turin. *Entre hybris et mélancolie: poétique, esthétique et usages de la liste littéraire dans le roman français contemporain (1963-2013)*. 2014. Université de Lausanne. PhD Dissertation. *Serval: serveur académique lausannois*. <serval.unil.ch/resource/serval:BIB_B3266248B812.P001/REF>, p. 170.

⁸⁷⁵ Unfortunately we cannot develop this idea here, but this is the reason why counting to three (or saying three words, such as ready, set, go) is a common way to start an activity: ‘one’ and ‘two’ is the minimum to establish a perceptible rhythm, and only on ‘three’ can the runner take-off or the listener join in.

⁸⁷⁶ Roger Scruton. “Dancing Properly.” *Confessions of a Heretic: Selected Essays*. Honiton: Notting Hill Editions, 2016. eBook.

⁸⁷⁷ Bernard Sève. *Op. cit.*, p. 91.

As we have seen, lists often do not ‘mean’ as narrative does, in relation to an actantial-experiential model; and paradigms, after all, cannot be personal views and constructions upon single opinions, but collective agreements without ownership. And yet, the lists we have analysed *do* have authors, and if, in the end, much is left up for the reader, they cannot mean or be anything we would want them to be, and something ‘authorial’ still resides in our own excursions. Once again, as in any partner dance, improvising owes as much to personal whim as it does to a careful attunement to the partner’s suggestions – how should one dance to the tune of the list?

A Laboratory of Metaphors

Let us set aside the process of ‘handing-off’ described above for a moment and consider the nature of the relationship between item and rubric which we have addressed in the previous chapter and is, in any case, crucial to understand how this process takes place – the manner by which the reader takes the list into their own hands should, naturally, conform to similar ‘rules’.

At this point, we are drawn to agree with Barney’s suggestion that lists are essentially “paradigmatic and [tend] towards metaphor, whereas a story is syntagmatic and tends towards metonymy. (...) we may speak of a metaphor as a disappointed list.”⁸⁷⁸ Hamon’s analysis of descriptive systems reaches a similar conclusion, regarding the cases in which a description might lack the “pantonyme,” and the reader must resort to a metaphorical understanding of the terms and their relations in order to “recover a legibility.”⁸⁷⁹ Yet, the last sentence in Barney’s quote does not need to be necessarily true: we could just as easily speak of some lists (such as the name of God) as disappointed, or disappointing, metaphors, or rather, a series of metaphorical attempts at a proper name.

⁸⁷⁸ Stephen A. Barney. *Op. cit.*, p. 193. We agree with the statement in general but note, of course, that lists too have a syntagmatic and metonymical dimension, particularly where the experience of reception is concerned. And lists are generated by operations of contiguity as well, as we have shown in relation to all cases, besides those of similitude.

⁸⁷⁹ Philippe Hamon. *Op. cit.*, p. 129.

We repeatedly underlined this negative quality of the list as naming in the previous chapter. Similarly, this negative nature of the metaphor is suggested by, among others, Max Black – “*taken as literal*, a metaphorical statement appears to be perversely asserting something to be what it is plainly known not to be”⁸⁸⁰ – or, once again, Barney: “metonymies are sequential, metaphors substitutional; metonymies regularly specify the thing by what it is or does, metaphors by what it is not.”⁸⁸¹ The item is decidedly *not* the rubric, but it is, like a metaphor, in some way *like* the rubric – it is a metaphor for the rubric. But the item is also *like* another item *in terms of* the rubric. Is one item, then, also a metaphor for another item? Where does metaphor fit in?

In his various writings on metaphor, José Ortega y Gasset assumes this negative aspect of the metaphorical statement and adds a sociological or anthropological angle (drawn from Heinz Werner’s 1919 *Die Ursprünge der Metaphor*) which locates the origins of metaphor in the “taboo,” a practice associated with fear (“miedo”) and avoidance (“elusión”). We could say that Ortega injects a degree of intentionality – culture – into Black’s abstract statement:

Y como la palabra es para el hombre primitivo un poco la cosa misma nombrada, sobreviene el menester de no nombrar el objeto tremendo sobre que ha recaído «tabú». De aquí que se designe con el nombre de otra cosa, mentándole en forma larvada y subrepticia. (...) He aquí la elusión metafórica.⁸⁸²

Fear and avoidance might as well be keywords to describe some of the affective dimensions both of naming in culture and of naming as a listing operation related to the rubric. Strategies of digression and accumulation in the lists in our *corpus* are seldom isolated from practices of misdirection and of avoiding the representation of *something* – and this for a variety of reasons, some of which are not strictly concerned with taboo (in the proper technical, anthropological, sense) but behave like one.

⁸⁸⁰ Max Black. “More About Metaphor.” Andrew Ortony (ed.). *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 21.

⁸⁸¹ Stephen A. Barney. *Op. cit.*, p. 193.

⁸⁸² José Ortega y Gasset. “La Deshumanización del Arte e Ideas Sobre la Novela.” *Obras Completas*. Vol. 3. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1983, p. 373.

Ortega's understanding of metaphor is complex and richer than this negative description. Taking it both as substitutional ("consiste en suplantar una cosa por otra"), but also comparative, he proposes that the two objects which constitute a metaphor serve to create a third, new, object:

Mas hacer la metáfora la declaración de su identidad radical, con igual fuerza que la de su radical no-identidad, nos induce a que no busquemos aquella en lo que ambas cosas son como imágenes reales, como términos objetivos; por tanto, a que hagamos de estas un mero punto de partida, un material, un signo más allá del cual hemos de encontrar la identidad en un nuevo objeto. (...) [U]na vez advertidos de que la identidad no está en las imágenes reales, insiste la metáfora tercamente en proponérmola. (...) Hemos hallado un objeto constituido por tres elementos o dimensiones: la cosa ciprés, la cosa llama —que se convierten ahora en meras propiedades de una *tercera persona*⁸⁸³

"Todas las demás potencias," he writes in "La Deshumanización del Arte," "nos mantienen inscritos dentro de lo real, de lo que ya es. Lo más que podemos hacer es sumar o restar unas cosas de otras. Sólo la metáfora nos facilita la evasión y crea entre las cosas reales arrecifes imaginarios, florecimiento de islas ingravidas."⁸⁸⁴

This 'thirdness' of metaphors suits well the implied thirdness of listing: an item's relation to any other is only understandable in terms of the rubric. And yet, if the rubric is forever in development, this third element must necessarily be a third item, and so on. In this sense, listing becomes a process of successive triangulation by which the following item is progressively discovered and given meaning within the list's preexisting structure. Crucially, *the list constitutes a comparative mode of inquiry*,⁸⁸⁵ by which the world is organised and known by virtue of a comparative, triangulating, gesture:

⁸⁸³ José Ortega y Gasset. "Ensayo de Estética a Manera de Prólogo." *Obras Completas*. Vol. 6. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1983, pp. 259-61

⁸⁸⁴ José Ortega y Gasset. "La Deshumanización del Arte e Ideas Sobre la Novela." *Idem*, p. 373.

⁸⁸⁵ This is outside the scope of the present work, but it is nevertheless interesting that comparative literature scholars seem to intuitively understand many aspects of the list described here, as evident in the complex and laborious discussions around, for example, the notion of canon which inevitably result in the elaboration of lists as a central task of the comparativist, or in the consciousness of the anthology (of climate fiction, of minor subjects, of marginal writers, of animal studies, etc.) itself as a rhetorical, persuasive, academic mode of discourse, and creator of important rubrics.

We often tend to forget the obvious: in this case, one of those aspects is related to the fact, to put it plainly, that we never compare two or more elements *among themselves*. The comparative gesture rests, as it is usually said, on a *tertium quid*, that “third (man)” which reveals that any relation between two things is, in reality, always between three things: the observation of the world is triangular. By comparing, we are not limited to recognising a relation which precedes the compared objects themselves: radically, we *constitute that relation*, and, as such, we constitute the object upon which the comparison acts – and which is never a mere result of the sum between object A and object B. More important than this sum is the *space*, the *distance*, and the *relation* which remains between them and wherein they manifest.⁸⁸⁶

Both Buescu and Ortega underline a call to disregard the mere “sum” of such different constituents, the first focusing instead on the successive ‘lacks’ which the system gradually accumulates and constitute, simultaneously, the comparative object as the result of a fruitful epistemological and ontographic gesture, and the latter insistently adverting to the ‘disappointing’ dimensions of the sum – the “flourishing” of metaphor “in-between things” is, for Ortega, the only thing which grants us the power to go beyond what already is.

Even if tendentiously, it is tempting to ascribe some deeper significance to a perceived importance of the number three and the process of triangulation involved in Ortega’s metaphor theory and the list itself. Returning to Buescu’s argument, the workings of the list are the workings of the paradoxical and self-recurring nature of Aristotle’s third man argument, to the point where we can formulate and illustrate this autonomous quality of the list in similar terms: for any plurality of items which partake in some quality represented by the rubric, a new item must come to clarify the nature of this similarity, and so on. Once the third item arrives to ‘complete’ the list, the addition of new items follows the same comparative process and, if at some point the list ends, this process of hermeneutic satisfaction can nevertheless carry on.

⁸⁸⁶ Helena Carvalhão Buescu. *Grande Angular: Comparatismo e Práticas de Comparação*. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2001, p. 22. My translation.

“Una sencilla observación nos hace encontrar el camino hacia ese nuevo mundo, donde los cipreses son llamas,”⁸⁸⁷ writes Ortega. And, indeed, lists are, at their most basic, seemingly simple (and even simplifying) forms. Yet, how complex they can truly be and how strange and fleeting the worlds they conjure. Speaking in unison, the readers of *The Pillow Book* can rebuild a court that cannot exist anymore and bask in its imaginary glow, just as the readers of *Pseudodoxia* can, for a moment, inhabit an England in which plurality transforms not into tyrannical censorship but true democracy of thought. The ‘and so on’ implicit in any loving relationship resides not in its true form in *Bouvard*, but in the vacated spaces it deliberately leaves for readers to imagine further adventures of its heroes or to transfer and project their own. In the same way, it would be impossible to fully account for a precise articulation of Ishmael’s philosophical and poetic proposal to consider the phantasmatic quality of existence in all its forms, just as it would be to articulate the intricacies of territorial, psychological, and affective geographies of *Invisible Cities* – were it not for the fact that such works allow us to not only briefly inhabit their worlds but understand them by virtue of a real proposed co-creation.

The *voice in unison*, or the passage of the testimony from writer to reader, is the fundamental operation of metaphorical continuity that lies at the centre of list-making techniques – the ability to carry on the metaphorical process which, because it is perceived as insufficient, must also be made to avoid the danger of becoming ‘dead.’ The perpetual orbiting of the list is like the bicycle’s forward momentum: the rider falls if it ends. If a “dead metaphor” is “not a metaphor at all, but merely an expression that no longer has a pregnant metaphorical use,”⁸⁸⁸ let us then transfer this sense of “use” – which both in lists and metaphors is always communal – to our lists and state that a ‘dead’ list is a closed list; a list to which no other items can be added in order to further enrich its metaphorical dimension. All that can be said about the rubric is now said and if this is expected in

⁸⁸⁷ José Ortega y Gasset. “Ensayo de Estética A Manera de Prólogo.” *Idem*, p. 260.

⁸⁸⁸ Max Black. *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

practical lists (even necessary in some cases), in non-practical lists it quickly becomes a hindrance: no loved one would be satisfied if a list of the reasons why they are loved should conclude, not with an “etc” or “and so on,” but with a “and that’s all.”

This would lead us down the path of thinking the metaphoric dimension of listing as residing not in the linguistic terms it is represented by but by considering the constellation of its rubric as *the* metaphor of the list. It is this kind of framework that we can find in Lakoff and Johnson’s “conceptual metaphor theory.” “The locus of metaphor,” writes Lakoff, “is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another”⁸⁸⁹ – such “mappings” are not of a linguistic nature but an ontological one.⁸⁹⁰ What he calls “the essence of metaphor” is still broadly identifiable as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another,”⁸⁹¹ but individual metaphorical expressions found in language are simple reflections of complex and collectively built conceptual domains. To use his example, metaphorical expressions such as “look how far we’ve come,” or “we should go our separate ways” are instances of the metaphor “love as journey.”

This seems to me to be the best way to understand just what is it that the lists in our *corpus* do. By marshalling a series of distinct techniques simultaneously, they serve to generate new, difficult, and unique conceptual domains, by providing their readers with novel variations on the “A is like B” structure and applying it to ideas and objects which would elude such a clear formulation. Using *The Pillow Book* as an example, “when you receive a letter from a distant man you care for, how nervously you struggle to open the tight seal on it!” is like *okashi*; the “Karasaki” promontory is like *okashi*; the seven-page account of the troubling composition of a poem is like *okashi*;⁸⁹² and so on. But these are only pale reflections of the deepest meaning that the list of *The Pillow Book*

⁸⁸⁹ George Lakoff. “Contemporary Theory of Metaphor.” Andrew Ortony (ed.) *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 203.

⁸⁹⁰ *Idem*, p. 208. As Lakoff adds afterwards, “The language is secondary. The mapping is primary.”

⁸⁹¹ George Lakoff, Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003. eBook.

⁸⁹² *The Pillow Book*, pp. 154, 232, and 97-104.

strives to express and to which it invites its readers to enrich. Those, however, elude clear formulations in the style of Lakoff. “Life is a Phantom,” “Joint Purposelessness is Friendship,” “Teishi’s Court is *Okashi*” are some ideas, but I suspect their real formulation is more difficult to express. Hence, however, their permanence.

What is the technique of the list, in this light? It is, first and foremost, *a comparative technique*, whose subject concerns the generation and exploration of metaphor in a communal context. The list is a *laboratory of metaphors*. It is a place, defined by the technique of circumscription, in which enumeration brings into play all those terms to which we are afforded the freedom to combine, manipulate, and enlarge in a gesture of creative comparison, devoted to the imagination of previously unthought-of metaphors. It is a playfield, where different concepts co-exist under the single condition that they are in some sense (not necessarily obvious) like one another in function of something else (the rubric). Of systems seemingly based solely on combinatorics we might observe that they fail at the task of producing something new; we might ask ourselves, can the list create new things? One could rejoin that new things come about all the time in lists, and not necessarily by the production of new items in unexpected digressions: unexpected juxtapositions hold primacy in the effect of ‘novelty’ elicited by some lists. But it is in the creation of this world of novel metaphors that the list holds greatest promise for the generation of new poetic images.

As we draw to a close, we could ponder on what was left out, what was chosen to be in, and remark that some choices must always be made regarding this matter: troubles of a list-maker. But reflecting on why this brings me to one last closing thought: it is obvious that much in this thesis, from the choice of texts to the theories and themes foregrounded in the analysis, has not followed a strict logical chain. Some of the process has been given to intuition and, most importantly, personal preference and affection. But could it have been otherwise? Renouncing a field or method which could foreclose my investigation resulted in a reliance on intuitive and even personalising

processes; meeting an object of study so vast and sinuous requires selection criteria which, if honest, always prefer an affectionate side. Something of the nature of the list contaminated the writing process, as large gestures of circumscription gathered disparate things together, digression into trivial matters imposed itself as essential, all this leading to a (hidden) rubric whose ghostly presence will explain everything – if the reader is ready to take up the mantle. I have two hopes: that I have not pretended it to be otherwise and that I might have nevertheless chanced upon serious and productive results. I leave with words which should have been at the start, were lists not those unicorns which can be read in any direction, whose end is always a beginning:

Madamina, il catalogo è questo
Delle belle che amò il padron mio;
un catalogo egli è che ho fatt'io;
osservate, leggete con me.⁸⁹³

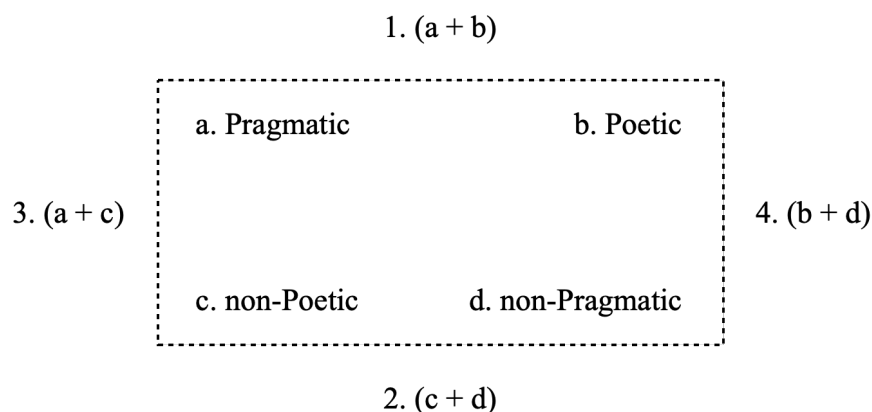
⁸⁹³ Lorenzo Da Ponte. *Don Giovanni*. London: Calder Publications, 1995, p. 57.

Appendix: The Pragmatic and the Poetic List

The various qualifications of lists as either ‘practical’, ‘pragmatic’, ‘poetic’, or ‘literary’ often run into uncomfortable ambiguous areas. Such strict classifications seem to inevitably create more issues than they solve. In order to accommodate these concerns and inconsistencies, we find it best to articulate the various possible relations between ‘poeticism’ and ‘pragmaticism’ within Greimas’ tool of the semiotic square.

The most immediate benefit of performing this exercise is the uncovering of several blind spots for what we might consider a list, even if some of these might arrive as particularly mysterious or strange. But let us take them at face value since they are of great aid in analysing certain passages of the works in the *corpus*. We also opted to use the terms *poetic* and *pragmatic* in order to further underline what is the common theme behind these kinds of divisions. According to our thesis that lists are consciously *chosen* modes of discourse that address and seek to represent a real world beyond the scope of other modes, it makes sense to adopt the pragmatic-poetic distinction since it pertains to questions of *use* and *objective*. Lists, in other words, are here understood as either poetic or pragmatic in relation to their intended or perceived intention of use.

Taking the pair ‘pragmatic’ and ‘poetic’, we draw the following diagram:



The metaterms of the square can be summarised in the following way: 1) the pragmatic poetic list; 2) the non-poetic non-pragmatic list; 3) the pragmatic non-poetic list; and 4) the poetic non-

pragmatic list.⁸⁹⁴ We begin with the constituent relations 3 and 4, as these two are arguably the simplest to identify since they comprise those unproblematic cases we think of when the division between poetic and pragmatic is first proposed:

3) Pragmatic non-poetic lists are the shopping lists, the top-10s, the census, the guest list, the Linnaean classification, the index, the bibliography, law, the dictionary, the menu, the to-do list... and so on. Defined in terms of use, the pragmatic non-poetic list is structured and constructed with a single purpose in mind. Once the task that it supplements or aids is complete, the list becomes useless. It can be destroyed or, if necessary, serve only as an instrument of retrospection, allowing one to ‘look back’ and examine the task.

If classified primarily in relation to function and use, the pragmatic list cannot be characterised by either finitude or infinitude, as Eco and Belknap respectively argue. Bernard Sève, who evades the question of pragmaticism or poeticism and focuses instead on the tripartite division of Goody, illustrates why such considerations are not pertinent, in the section titled “une liste n’est ni nécessairement finie ni nécessairement infinie”:

Il existe des listes finies et des listes infinies ; les premières peuvent en outre être closes ou ouvertes, les secondes sont nécessairement ouvertes. La liste des empereurs romains est non seulement finie, mais également définitivement close ; les listes électorales françaises sont finies, sans être définitivement closes (...). Certains cas sont ambigus : la liste des œuvres de Bach est certainement finie, mais elle n’est pas nécessairement close, on peut avoir un jour la bonne fortune de retrouver une cantate perdue, qu’on ajoutera au catalogue dis *Bach Werke Verzeichnis*.⁸⁹⁵

⁸⁹⁴ For the sake of clarity and brevity we exclude the two remaining (and less used) semic structures of contradiction: the pragmatic and non-pragmatic list, and the poetic and non-poetic list.

⁸⁹⁵ Bernard Sève. *Op. cit.*, p. 31.

When considering the matter from this perspective, the question of whether pragmatic lists are infinite or not becomes trivial, as do other related questions such as whether lists are ordered or not – some are and some are not.

One more alluring proposal, also by Eco, is that pragmatic lists have a purely referential function since “they refer to objects in the outside world and have the purely practical purpose of naming and listing them.”⁸⁹⁶ And yet, counterexamples of this also exist such as the genre of the lists of *desiderata*, like the one penned by Robert Boyle.⁸⁹⁷ In a *desiderata*, scientists like Boyle or Francis Bacon before him would list all those inventions and discoveries that have not yet been achieved by contemporary science but should guide its practitioners in future endeavours. All this in a very pragmatic – and programmatic – sense, with individuals such as Leibniz justifying “their investigations by the fact that Bacon had included their research topic among his *desiderata*.”⁸⁹⁸ *Desiderata* are only one example of a non-referential pragmatic list.

Young supplies a radically different perspective on the matter, lending further nuance to the classification of pragmatic or poetic based on use with the category of ‘meaning’ as an objective to which the function of a given list is, or is not, oriented. Discussing the ways by which lists destabilise the traditional understanding of the orality-literacy polarity established by Walter J. Ong and others, Young writes:

Primarily at issue is that the polarity rests on an idea of meaning that lies behind or within language in both its spoken and written forms. Pragmatic or operative lists do not ‘mean’ in this way. They possess neither an inherent narrative function, nor semiological units to be decoded. Lists reject conventions like prose and syntax. Meaning does not arise from grammatical structures of language because the latter do not factor in the construction of a list, which instead adheres to a different, non-

⁸⁹⁶ Umberto Eco. *Op. cit.*, p. 113.

⁸⁹⁷ A photograph of Boyle’s list and a transcription can be found in the website of the Royal Society. See “What Scientists Want: Robert Boyle’s To-Do List.” *The Royal Society*. 27th August 2010. <royalsociety.org/blog/2010/08/what-scientists-want-boyle-list/>.

⁸⁹⁸ Vera Keller. *Op. cit.*, p. 728.

grammatical structure. Certain visual and graphical qualities govern the creation of most lists – columns, rows, and techniques or ordering determine its form and the manner by which a list is written, or better, the way it is filled in. But these structures do not produce meaning, at least not in a phenomenological or hermeneutic sense.

He concludes by stating, on the administrative Mesopotamian lists studied by Goody and Schmandt-Besserat, that “the only ‘meaning’ we can attribute to them is purely functional.”⁸⁹⁹ Indeed, this seems to be the best way to describe the pragmatic non-poetic list: they are created in relation to and exhausted by a specific function.

4) The poetic non-pragmatic list is, on the other hand, difficult to pin down. If we take its ‘non-pragmatic’ sense as being opposite to the pragmatic aspect described above, we might arrive at ideas that come close to certain vague notions about poetry, namely, that it does *not* exhaust itself in its first and obvious function, etc. And yet it seems that poetic non-pragmatic lists are easy to find: none other than Eco has supplied a fairly comprehensive taxonomy of poetic lists. The issue is that to provide a positive definition of the poetic list at least as articulated as for the pragmatic, would require us to embark on the task of defining poetry itself – a task to which I find myself neither qualified nor inclined. We might, however, limit ourselves to a few observations.

Like other compendiums more directed towards the poetic list such as Spufford’s, it seems more appropriate to approach its possible categories by theme rather than by operations. If Young, for example, divides his chapters into topics such as the top 10, the census, or the “listicle,” we find in Eco and Spufford, instead, “the ineffable,” “coherent excess,” “vertigos,” “lists of the heart,” “feasts,” and so on. What brings such lists together is never the method by which they are meant to be read nor the series of operations implicit in their presentation or reference to more familiar (and pragmatic) list formats. Such categories mix ordered and unordered lists, closed and open, infinite and infinite, etc.

⁸⁹⁹ Liam Cole Young. *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

In other words, even the classificatory schemes proposed by academics interested in the poetic non-pragmatic list emphasise the absence of function as a rule. Naturally, the poetic list can also take inspiration from certain operational principles derived from pragmatic lists. Their function is never exhausted by these operational principles, since their meaning is precisely never purely functional. If one depends too heavily on the other, however, we might be before a different type of list, as we will see.

The diagram also posits two other structures: 1) the pragmatic and poetic list, and 2) the non-poetic and non-pragmatic list. More complex than the previous two, they comprise a large portion of the cases which we will analyse. If any summary can be offered regarding this pair, is that both instances navigate ambiguities of the pragmatic-poetic pair, providing natural fertile ground for some of the most profound reflections in the texts in our *corpus*.

1) Lists that are both pragmatic and poetic include, for example, any pragmatic non-poetic list inserted within a novel but go beyond Fludernik's fourth category of the "list as insert." An understanding of the pragmatic use of a quoted shopping list is still required as the premise for the reader's understanding of the text but its relation with the narrative is as important – or even more important – that it. In *Moby-Dick*, for example, when Ishmael transcribes a "long detailed list of the outfits for the larders and cellars of 180 Dutch whalers" from a Dutch book, the resulting list cannot be reduced to the purely pragmatic nature of its supposed origin:

In this chapter it was, headed "Smeer," or "Fat," that I found a long detailed list of the outfits for the larders and cellars of 180 sail of Dutch whalers; from which list, as translated by Dr. Snodhead, I transcribe the following:

400,000 lbs. of beef.
60,000 lbs. Friesland pork.
150,000 lbs. of stock fish.
550, lbs. of biscuit.
72,000 lbs. of soft bread.

2,800 firkins of butter.

20,000 lbs. Texel & Leyden cheese.

144,000 lbs. cheese (probably an inferior article).

550 ankers of Geneva.

10,800 barrels of beer.

Most statistical tables are parchingly dry in the reading; not so in the present case, however, where the reader is flooded with whole pipes, barrels, quarts, and gills of good gin and good cheer.⁹⁰⁰

Ishmael's closing sentence is an ironic observation of the fact that the inclusion of the pragmatic list in the text of the novel, transforms it into something else. This happens *despite* the operative and statistical functions of Dr. Snodhead's list, and therein lies the humour: the result is a hybrid list whose meaning in the text depends on our understanding of the workings of this very same list as a pragmatic object as well as its newly acquired poetic dimension, their differences, similarities, and ironic interplay.

Lists of the dead are another illustration of this case, their poetic dimension often being wholly dependent on their pragmatic use, and vice versa – merely accounting for the dead can become a eulogy, as Mary Ebbott explains regarding the casualty list at the beginning of Aeschylus' *Persians*:

As a burial honor, the Athenian casualty lists belong to one type of civic discourse about death in war. In the *Persians*, however, such a list is surprisingly used for the barbarian enemy dead. Although the listing here retains the conventional features of the Athenian casualty list, the framing discourse of tragedy changes the meaning conveyed by the list: instead of a roster designating those celebrated in a special grave, it becomes a disturbing listing of war dead who are not honored and not even buried.⁹⁰¹

⁹⁰⁰ *Moby-Dick*, p. 486.

⁹⁰¹ Mary Ebbott. "The List of the War dead in Aeschylus' *Persians*." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 100 (2000), p. 83.

Outside of the scope of pragmatic lists inserted in novels or drama, a list such as that of the victims of the coronavirus pandemic published by *The New York Times* in May of 2020 similarly shows how the balance between the practical and the poetic is as fragile as it is powerful, especially if one's goal lies in a space where politics, journalism, social commentary, and collective mourning overlap.⁹⁰²

Ancient oral mnemonic poetry is yet another variation on the interplay between poetic use and pragmatic: the mnemonic function of enumerations of divine lineages, territorial divisions, etc., depends (among other things) on the prosodical quality of the list itself as poetry. This prosodical dimension serves the pragmatic goal of their being essentially gnomic texts concerned with the preservation of knowledge.⁹⁰³

Defined in terms of use, then, the pragmatic poetic list depends on the understanding of the ambiguities governing the overlap between the two forms. A poetic-pragmatic list does not depend only on our understanding of the specific operative chains of the pragmatic list but on an understanding of the operations of lists in general shared by both pragmatic and poetic lists, and the way that meaning is engendered by a simultaneous appeal to a closed pragmatic function and an open poetic dimension. Each half is animated by an understanding of the permanent (and perhaps not peaceful) dialogue between the two.

2) The non-poetic non-pragmatic list presents us with a problem in which the resort to the division as pertaining to *use* reveals its importance. We might begin by considering that such lists are those lacking any discernible use or from which any hypothetical conditions of use have been lost. This second point might refer to lists of signs or images that *might* have been part of an encoded message (a secret message or someone's doodling?), hieroglyphs as received by readers

⁹⁰² John Grippe. "The Project Behind a Front Page Full of Names." *The New York Times*. 23 May 2020. <[nytimes.com/2020/05/23/reader-center/coronavirus-new-york-times-front-page.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/23/reader-center/coronavirus-new-york-times-front-page.html)>.

⁹⁰³ A rich collection of examples of these lists can be found in the three volumes *The Growth of Literature*, by H. M. Chadwick and Nora K. Chadwick. See, for instance, the chapter titled "Antiquarian Learning" from the first volume, specifically the sections "genealogies of families" and "other catalogues" (pp. 270-83).

prior to Champollion's deciphering (language or magic?), or traces in a cave-wall (the calendar of a wayward explorer or accidental artefacts of geological formations?). Divided between chance and hidden actors, it is no wonder lists of this kind are at the basis of detective novels, conspiracy theories, and other wild speculations of a hermeneutical nature. If poetic-pragmatic lists are characterised by a productive and deliberate ambiguity, these are, instead, ambiguous precisely because no judgment can be made about productivity or deliberateness. They offer only the unknown and their ambiguity is far more disconcerting.

We might think about the issue of use, however, in a still more provocative way, classifying also as non-poetic non-pragmatic lists those which the loss of the agent upon whom resided the competency of intentionality bars any ability to consider such questions. Thus, tree rings, sea waves, geological strata, etc., can be regarded as natural lists whose use is mysterious. If one is keen to ascribe a divine author, for example, to such signs (and hence a message), then indeed they are lists, but outside of the realm of human technique in relation to which the judgement of use can be pronounced. Once again, such 'lists' are at the margins of any definition, and a stretch of credulity is necessary to even consider them linguistic in the first place. Yet, it is precisely with these hypotheses that novels such as *Moby-Dick* or *Invisible Cities* repeatedly flirt, and it is also in the ability to illuminate these listing dimensions of such works that the semiotic square fully reveals its pertinence.

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Images

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