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On the Materiality of Repetition

Repetition seems to be eluding definition and analysis. Even though it has, in many cases, found its place among the lines of literary criticism (especially regarding oral poetry), it is still characterized by a peculiar conceptual status, which has been said to be in essence 'paradoxical' (Rimmon-Kenan 151). My aim in this paper will be to try and point out certain aspects of repetition as materiality. This hypothesis, that repetition in texts functions as a device with a material nature, stems from a remark concerning Homeric poetry made by Milman Parry, principal originator of oral-formulaic theory. According to this theory, oral poems are composed during performance with the help of formulas, "groups of words regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea" (Lord 4). To put it very simply, the "essential ideas" that a day is breaking or that a battle is raging or that a person is replying to another are expressed with recurrent groups of words, each time chosen according to what the verse requires in order to stay metrically intact. Another important part of these formulas has to do with words used to accompany the names of heroes; for example, Hector is, among other things, μέγας (great) and κορυθαίολος (which could be translated as "he moves his glancing helmet around"); Ulysses is πολύμητις (he has many thoughts, he thinks a lot) and δίος (he descends from Zeus, he is Zeus-like or God-like). Gods and heroes in these epics have their typical escorting adjectives, which are also shared between some of them (Parry 55, 64). In his dissertation "The Traditional Epithet in Homer", Parry interestingly proceeds to state that these recurrent groups of words "mean nothing in themselves", as "the only factor determining their use [is] the facility of versification which they afford the poet" (118).

Through repetition, then, words might serve as pure material, something like the bricks of a wall or the digits of binary code, that mainly convey information, as opposed to meaning (we will return to this fundamental opposition later on); they tend to become mostly utilitarian items. These reiterated words shed their full signifying capacity, only to exist in combination with other words and communicate simpler things, like "day broke" or "Hector said". As Parry writes, "an epithet is not ornamental in itself, whatever may be its signification: it is only by dint of being used over and again with a certain substantive or group of substantives that it acquires this quality. It becomes ornamental when its meaning loses any value of its own and becomes so involved with the idea of its substantive that the two can no longer be separated" (127). I think both metaphors I referred to above (the bricks and the bits) can claim some validity, as can many others in this case. In this brief essay, my point is to bring forth these remarks as the basis of thinking about repetition in material terms and, more specifically, presenting certain material functions of the literary device in question; these material functions will be openness as reader-text communication, and memorization through textual mapping. But we will not proceed to that just yet.

I would like us to make a short detour and deal with the notion of ornamentality we came across in the last excerpt of Parry's text, because it's quite a material notion and it goes well with the brilliant choice of subject made for this conference by the wonderful team behind it. Why does Parry (and most of the relevant scholarly literature) refer to these words as ornamental? Isn't an ornament something particularly useless? (that's an attribute that even relates the ornament to crime, according to the architect Adolf Loos). How are these repeated words useless since they are necessary for the verse to be kept intact? The answer, in my view, is that the words are used here as material, and they are very useful as such, while their signifying capabilities become useless, like an ornament. That's why Parry explicitly says that [for the reader] "to look for a particular meaning in the case of each of these [epithets for] heroes would be lost labor" (128), exactly as Loos writes that "ornament is wasted labor power and hence wasted health" (33). In both cases, meaning is opposed to function or information; Loos thinks that we need unornamented, plainly functioning buildings; Parry thinks that Homer expels the meaning of words to convey information.

I believe there is an interesting, quasi antithetical, relation emerging between these elements of communication: on one side, we have meaning as conceptuality, as something we can understand and interpret; on the other, we have information as materiality to be perceived and to be used. Obviously, no verbal message is comprised solely of one or the other of these 'extremes;' it follows that repetition can in no case only be a material function of literary language; that's not the point of my argumentation. In any case, repetition does oscillate between concept and material in a very interesting manner. Let me use a well-known example: a conscious reading subject cannot ignore the fact that in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" certain words or phrases are constantly reiterated throughout the text (most of all, the word "Nevermore," applied as a refrain). Each of these occurrences invite the reader to take part in a two-fold process: on one hand, the reader recognizes information in iterativity per se (something material, like these bricks or bits I mentioned before) and derives pleasure "from the sense of identity," as Poe himself writes in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition" (1140). On the other hand, it quickly becomes obvious that no mere sameness is to be found in these repeated occurrences; every time the reader comes across a word or phrase previously read, their meaningful relations with the totality of the work and its interpretation are rearranged (Jakobson 15; see also Iser 278).

Here lies the 'paradox' I referred to in the beginning, concerning the notion of repetition: it represents formal confinement, the realization that possibilities are not limitless (let's say that bricks cannot be of any shape or size), while at the same time embodying progress and possibility itself. Umberto Eco accepts and supports this oxymoron in his seminal book "The Open Work," where he writes the following about James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*: "The opening word of the first page is the same as the closing word of the last page of the novel. Thus, the work is finite in one sense, but in another sense it is unlimited. Each occurrence, each word stands in a series of possible relations with all the others in the text" (10). In this scenario, the reader is confined to recognizing these repeated occurrences, but also invited to fill

the gaps and (re)create meaningful interrelations. Repetition as information (as material, that is) comes with an infinite set of potential meanings.

When Raymond Queneau composed his "Cent Mille Milliards de Poémes" ("One Hundred Thousand Billion Poems"), in accordance with the declarations of the then newly founded Oulipo group (Motte, *Early Oulipo* 47), he had created a staggering amount of possible, yet unrealizable by a single subject, texts and meanings, because, according to Queneau's own calculations, going through all possible sonnets (10^{14}) "would demand more than a million centuries of reading, at a rate of eight hours a day, two hundred days a year" (Queneau qtd. in Motte 47). His collection of ten sonnets, each comprising of fourteen lines following the formal tradition, is an excellent example of the 'paradox' we 've been dealing with. The fact that all lines comply with metrical and other constraints, while at the same time they can randomly combine with one another to create an "abundance of possible meanings" (Eco 94), describes, in my view, the role of repetition in texts: to embody the dominant, omnipresent oscillation between meaning and information, mimesis and innovation, law and transgression, signification and music (see Kristeva 433). By allowing the reader to comprehend this complexity, repetition serves as a fundamental trait of accessibility and openness in literature.

This is the first of two main functions of repetition in its material nature that I wanted to present. As we 've previously noted, information (like material) is recognizable; we simply know it's there. You know I already said something about this, and this knowledge lets you in on certain aspects of the composition of the text I am reading to you. This notion of recognizability is key to my take on repetition as openness, in the way of reader-text communication. If a work of art is to carry significant potential meanings, it first needs to inform its spectators or audience about itself; foremostly, it has to tell us what it's made of; it has to reveal its material. Literature seems to me to be quite obscure in this respect, as opposed to other, more material arts (if we can put materiality on a measuring scale) like painting or sculpture – I feel like it is not in my ability to elaborate on this right now; the subject is open to debate. Anyway, in the case of the literary work of art, informing the reader or listener about material things often consists of letting them know something that has to do with the creative process (in some cases, this can take the form of confessions, intentional or unintentional, apparent or covert, concerning thoughts, references, and influences that had a role to play during composition).

Repetition provides the reader with an example of authorial creativity. In the historical context of the closed work, if I may return to Eco for a moment, this example might not have been practically useful, because the reader supposedly thought of the creative process as unknown territory (I invite you to keep this spatial metaphor in mind, as we will be adding to it); territory in which only a gifted subject can wander, somebody who composes "by a species of fine frenzy," as Poe playfully writes in his essay on composition I quoted above (1137). But contemporary literary theory has taken a decisive turn towards openness, notably shifting the weight from the independence of dealing with aesthetics to the importance of understanding poetics (Robey in Eco xiii). This shift leads me to think that reading as a dynamic, dialectical process (Iser 294) now has an explicitly 'educational' role; in a way, reading is the first step towards writing. I argue that repetition in literary works enhanc-

es the reader's or listener's view of the creative process thanks to efficient communication between them and the text, in a way that brings them closer to composing (or thinking about composing) a work by themselves. Let me proceed to another 'flashback,' this time to Milman Parry's thoughts on oral epic poetry and the social conditions under which it emerged and grew: "from their earliest childhood," he writes, "[the] audience [...] heard again and again long recitations of epic poetry, poetry composed always in the same style. The diction of this poetry, accessible to the modern reader only by way of long study, was familiar to them in its smallest details" (129). I think that this kind of familiarity requires information, and that repetition, as far as its material aspects are concerned, is very important in this respect.

This kind of familiarity also implies some significant knowledge of the system; a knowledge substantial enough for the audience to be capable of performing a work themselves, at least in an amateur or incomplete way; through repeated hearings of repetitive poems, people were effectively taught how to 'do poetry.' This conclusion can be tested and verified on the more recent example of modern Greek popular poetry, where similar techniques are applied in composition and performance (see Sifakis 81-90). Mostly in the rural areas of the country, but, up to a historical point, in the cities too, people grew up listening to a number of oral poems or songs, each tailored for a specific social instance: some were heard on the dinner table, some on the road to work, some during work, some on the occasion of a wedding or a funeral. These were societies in which poetry was ever-present (Politis 13). What interests me more is the fact that the audience too, not just the professional performers, ended up learning a great many verses by heart and could reproduce them in various circumstances as they saw fit (Sifakis 35-6).

This guides us into the second function of repetition: memorization. I believe there's no need for me to say much about how repetition aids memorization per se, as I guess most of us have some experience of trying to memorize a text through repeated readings. I would like to focus on the link between memory and the materiality of repetition. When dealing with memory, one must not forget to read a book entitled "The Art of Memory," written by Frances Yates (1966). In this book, she examines various methods of memorization (defined as mnemotechnics), used by orators, artists, and scholars, from antiquity to the renaissance. All these techniques have one thing in common: they see memory as material space through an "architectural" system. "We have to think of the ancient orator," writes Yates (3), "as moving in imagination through his memory building whilst he is making his speech, drawing from the memorized places the images he has placed on them. The method ensures that the points are remembered in the right order, since the order is fixed by the sequence of places in the building". This description shows us that words and ideas were assigned to material things in order to be remembered.

But why didn't they just memorize the words? As Jack Goody writes in a fascinating book entitled "The Interface Between the Written and the Oral", "it is not difficult to see why the use of mnemotechnics for words rather than things was difficult, partly because of the large number of possibilities, partly because of lesser concreteness, partly because of the complexity of meaning" (181). It becomes evident that conceptual ideas are less 'memory-friendly' than material things; in other

words, complex meaning is less susceptible to memorization than concrete information. Following Milman Parry's remarks, we 've seen how repeated words or phrases tend to contain more information and less meaning, compared to words uttered just once. I think we can move one step further and speak of repetition as a kind of textual landmark, a material point of interest in the body of the text, universally perceptible and functionally understandable, like a utilitarian object. To summarize, this object has two main, intertwined functions: informing the readers or listeners about the creative process, and helping them keep texts in their memory, so as to let them reuse or reproduce them.

I'll finish with an example of such reproduction through transmediation, a notion defined as "the transfer of meaning, form, or content from one medium to another" (Tornborg 30). I must state that by my choice of example I'll be repeating a small part of what our dear colleague Stella chose to talk to us about four years ago here in the University of Potsdam (more specifically, I'll be borrowing the name of an artist she referred to, Marcel Broodthaers, about whom I didn't know much before then). In 1969, Broodthaers published a book with the title "Un coup de dés jamais n' abolira le hasard," following Stephane Mallarmé's poem of the same title. Let me quote part of the text that describes Broodthaers' work in New York's Museum of Modern Art: "In designing his edition, Broodthaers blocked out the lines of the original work with solid black bars of varying width, dependent on the original type size, turning the original text into an abstract image of the poem (Broodthaers also replaced the word *Poème*, on the title page, with *Image*)". What is here called "an abstract image" is the effect of repetition as information, as material. The visual artist acknowledges that pure, material information, in the form of these solid black bars (that look a lot like two-dimensional bricks, in my view), is able to allude to possible meanings that were once conveyed by words. In 2008, another visual artist, Michalis Pichler, took Broodthaers' "Image" and turned it into what he called a 'sculpture,' by cutting out the black bars and leaving empty spaces in their place.

This is a never-ending process; art has always been full of transmediations and transtextual relations. But regardless of whether a work consists primarily of ink, color, or bits, I think we could also acknowledge repetition as its material.

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Περίληψη

Δημήτρης Πρόκος

Σχετικά με την υλικότητα της επανάληψης

Η επανάληψη είναι ένα σύνθετο αλλά, ομολογουμένως, εξαιρετικά κοινό κειμενικό φαινόμενο, το οποίο έχει μελετηθεί επισταμένως ήδη από την κλασική αρχαιότητα, όταν ειδήμονες της ρητορικής τέχνης επιχείρησαν να καταγράψουν τις βασικές τους τεχνικές προς όφελος των μαθητευόμενών τους. Πιο πρόσφατα, τον περασμένο δηλαδή αιώνα, η επανάληψη μελετήθηκε εντατικά ως στοιχείο της προφορικότητας και της λαϊκής ποίησης εν γένει· στο πλαίσιο αυτό, αναγνωρίστηκε η δυνατότητά της να υποστηρίζει την απομνημόνευση, καθώς και να υποβοηθά τη διαδικασία της σύνθεσης κατά την επιτέλεση. Στην παρούσα εργασία εξερευνάται αφετηριακά η υλική διάσταση της επαναληπτικότητας. Πιο συγκεκριμένα, εστιάζοντας σε ορισμένους τρόπους περιγραφής και εφαρμογής του υπό εξέταση σχήματος, όπως μαρτυρούνται στη σχετική βιβλιογραφία, επιχειρούμε να αναδείξουμε κάποιες πρωτίστως υλικής φύσεως λειτουργίες του. Συχνά η επανάληψη αντιμετωπίστηκε ως πρόβλημα ύφους ή συνδέθηκε αποκλειστικά με την έμφαση. Στόχος μας εδώ είναι να τεθεί το ζήτημα υπό νέα προοπτική και με ανανεωμένους μεθοδολογικούς όρους· επικεντρωνόμαστε σε μνημονικές, επικοινωνιακές και “χαρτογραφικές” λειτουργίες της επανάληψης.