Repetition: An Introduction

A moment's reflection will bring to mind two fundamental features of repetition: it is ubiquitous, but its effects are highly ambiguous. The ubiquity of repetition in all aspects of human existence is obvious: daily life largely consists of routines in which we do things in the same way day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, and time itself is measured by means of identical, repeated units. Rituals, prayers and ceremonies, be they formal or informal, are defined by the exact repetition of words and actions. Learning and memorising is done by means of repetition, and remembering itself is an act of repeating, of bringing back something seen, heard, said or experienced before. Life without repetition would be a life without tradition, memory, history and cultural practices. And yet repetition is by no means always experienced as something positive: while one person enjoys doing the same thing over and over again, another will crave change and novelty, and what is a pleasant, energy-saving routine for some people may be tedious boredom for others. Repetition and variation or change, one soon realizes, are mutually dependent: repetition is a powerful force because of the possibility (or sometimes impossibility) of change, and variation can only be perceived against the background of sameness, that is repetition.

What has just been sketched here for life in general is equally valid for language. It is a truism (explicitly formulated by Chomsky) that human language allows the production of an infinite number of different sentences by means of a finite repertoire of elements (sounds, words, sentence patterns). On the basic, structural level, language is thus a complex interaction of repetition and variation, of sameness and difference. This creative tension between sameness and difference also characterizes the uses of language in general and, in particular, of language in literature: while certain text types such as weather-forecasts or cookery recipes rely heavily on sameness, others such as commentary or essay emphasize creativity, that is difference. Repetition and variation also

characterise literature in various ways: repetition, for example, is characteristic of children's literature or poetry, while elegant variation was an ideal of prose style until the advent of modernism. In language and literature, as well as in life, repetition is a highly ambiguous, if not paradoxical phenomenon. The *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes Theophilus Gale, who says approvingly that "the sacred Scriptures abound in elegant Repetitions" (*The Court of the Gentiles*, 1669-78), but the Scriptures themselves admonish: "When ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking" (Matthew 6.7). The difficulty, obviously, lies in deciding which repetitions are "elegant" and which are "vain."

Repetition with its many facets was thus an ideal topic for the seventh biennial symposium of SAUTE, the Swiss Association of University Teachers of English. The symposium, which was held at the University of Zürich on 7 and 8 May 1993, brought together linguists as well as literary scholars, people teaching in Switzerland as well as invited guests from abroad, and this volume contains a representative selection of the papers given and then prepared for print. A collection of only thirteen papers cannot possibly cover all aspects of the topic, but with its stimulating mixture of linguistic and literary aspects, of the general and the particular, it gives insight into its vast potential. In the following these papers will be characterized briefly, chiefly by way of quotations. It is perhaps well to remember at this point that the time-honoured practice of academic quotation is a form of exact repetition, chosen by the (quoting) author because the (original) author found an ideal, succinct way of expressing an idea. Quotation thus also honours the person quoted: reference serves as an expression of reverence. Quoting in an introduction, however, means that most readers will encounter the repeated, quoted item before its original occurrence. In such a case quotations anticipate and thus point forward rather than backward, and together they form an overture to the main work that follows. Joyce, a masterful practitioner of repetition (see Fritz Senn's paper), exploited this device to the full in his introduction to the "Sirens" episode of *Ulysses*.[1]

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[1] All page numbers below refer to papers printed in this volume. Capitals changed into lower case letters and vice versa are not marked.

In the first paper Jean Aitchison provides a comprehensive survey of the uses of repetition in language and its treatment by linguists. She pays particular attention to the three variables of function, intentionality and optionality, and she is the first to make a point that is repeated often throughout this collection: "No-one is quite sure whether repetition is good or bad, either in literature or linguistics. . . . Linguists are therefore faced with the paradox that repetition is widely used, yet also widely avoided"(11f.). In the second linguistic paper David Allerton is concerned with the latter, namely the avoidance of repetition in certain syntactic structures. His starting point is the insight that "it is virtually impossible to be totally explicit in every sentence we utter; life is just too short. Speakers in most situations, therefore, roughly follow Grice's maxim of quantity, making their utterance only as informative as it needs to be" (35). Andreas Jucker also takes up one of Jean Aitchison's points, namely that "extensive repetition is also found in co-operative conversational exchanges" (21). He starts out by saying that "to repeat oneself means to say the same thing twice. At a time and age when efficiency is the battle cry in all aspects of our daily life, it seems singularly inappropriate to repeat oneself. However, even a cursory glance at any transcription of actual conversations shows that repetitions are very pervasive. They are used regularly and they seem to play an important role in conversations" (47). Using relevance theory as a methodological basis he can show that even seemingly pointless repetitions in discourse are relevant.

Derek Attridge's paper is the first of three contributions that deal with repetition in literature on a general level. His starting point, like Jucker's, is a theory (Cureton's analysis of rhythmic phrasing in English verse), and like Jucker he attempts to show how exact verbal repetition can be accommodated within it: "My argument is that in the experience of the poem as a temporal phenomenon, immediate exact repetition of verbal material has a rather special role to play, and one that, in thwarting many of our attempts at systematic analysis, highlights the specifically *literary* operation of phrasal movement in poetry. . . . To say something and then say it again, in exactly the same words, is to transgress the dictates of good style and good sense; the very phenomenon often regarded as the distinctive feature of poetic discourse becomes, in its purest form, a mark of poetic collapse" (70). Brian Vickers's paper deals with rhetoric, where repetition has traditionally been held in high esteem and where it has been elaborately codified in a number of rhetorical figures: "In the rhetorical

theory of the figures the main associations of repetition are with emphasis, emotional intensity. But such theory, however detailed, can never be completely descriptive of rhetorical practice" (97). After a historical survey of the treatment of repetition in rhetoric, therefore, Vickers combines this theory with practice and concludes with a detailed interpretation of three passages from Shakespeare, Dickens and Beckett. Max Nänny, finally, is concerned with an extremely iconic form of repetition, namely verbal echoes. He points out that "the artistic use of echo, 'the ultimate in repetition' (Jean Aitchison), has a long, rich and varied tradition both in literature and music" (115) and then establishes a comprehensive taxonomy of "the chief formal devices that imitate or mime some of the distinctive features of an echo" (119) with examples from Ovid and Edmund Spenser to John Barth and Brian Patten.

The next six papers all deal with repetition in the works of individual authors, arranged in roughly chronological order. In his discussion of Byron's *Don Juan* Ernest Giddey points out, initially, that "Don Juanism is a specialization based on repetition" (146), and then shows how "Byron's iterative mood" manifests itself in "mythic re-enactments, verbal duplications, [and the] recurrence of similar movements in the structure of the *ottava rima*" (151). Adam Piette is concerned, above all, with the ambiguity of Tennyson's highly artistic rhyming. He starts out by saying that "it is difficult to decide whether sound effects *concentrate* our acoustic attention on certain senses in the words by their density and voiced accent, or whether they *disperse* attention by emptying words of semantic importance" (158) and concludes that "in responding 'lovingly' to the music of sound-repetitions, we read in heart and pulse and voice" while "in responding 'formally' to their mechanical reproduction, we read them as hollow symptoms of a dying convention" (167). Martin Heusser points out, first of all, that Hardy himself was highly conscious of repetition: "The repetition of what took place in the past is a phenomenon Hardy regards as one of the basic conditions of human life itself – if not the fundamental law governing human existence" (173). In the main part of his paper he discusses the fundamental question found throughout Hardy's work, namely whether or not the past will influence the present, and the consequences this has for the notion of tragedy in Hardy. Fritz Senn gives an informed overview of repetition in the works of Joyce: "We can't help, Joyce seems to have realised at some pristine turning point, being repetitive; there is nothing to create but remakes, and one way out is to

parade the artefacts *as* remakes" (190). This is especially true of *Finnegans Wake* where understanding "is replaced by the discovery of repetition, or its creative invention. We may not know what something on the page is supposed to convey, but we remember having come across some similar configuration before, and there is something comforting in the aha-effect" (199f.). Hans Osterwalder looks at a series of poems by Tony Harrison and shows how "in comparison with the countless 'vers librists' at large today," Harrison's poetry "embodies Jakobson's poetic function, namely the use of repetition and parallellism, to a remarkably high degree and with a remarkable measure of success in terms of poetic quality" (218). Paul Taylor, finally, in discussing native American writing links cultural practice with literature: "The essential feature of healing ceremony throughout native American practices is repetition, often in the form of story; and, expectedly, the structure of native American story consists of interlacings of verbal and incidental repetition" (221). In his interpretation of two novels by Leslie Marmon Silko and N. Scott Momaday Taylor shows that "repetition of incident is a distinct and essential narratological strategy." Such repetition, in turn, is part of an ideology which "denies the eurocentric obsession with progress by denying a conception of 'reality' tied to temporal sequence" (224).

The paper concluding the volume, by the experimental psychiatrist and psychopharmacologist Roland Fischer, looks at repetition from a much more general perspective again. In his wide-ranging discussion he provides evidence for the idea that all "knowledge is already there latent in the mind and that recollection is the process by which this knowledge is raised to awareness" (243). Startling as it may seem at first, this view goes back to Plato, and it is present in other papers as well: Derek Attridge, for example, maintains that "meaning itself is grounded in repetition; the never-before-experienced, the wholly other, is meaningless, not even available to perception" (81). Repetition, then, may not only be ubiquitous, as suggested at the beginning of this introduction, but it may be the very basis of all perception and cognition.

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