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The Movement of Meaning: Phrasing and Repetition in English Poetry

Derek Attridge

I

Milton's defence of rhymeless verse in the note preceding *Paradise Lost* is one of the best known comments on the movement of poetry in the history of English literary criticism:

> True musical delight . . . consists only in apt numbers, fit quantity of syllables, and the sense variously drawn out from one verse into another. (457)

The first two of these properties are clearly metrical phenomena, however problematic Milton's own sense and use of "apt numbers" and "fit quantity of syllables" might be; but the third refers directly to the experience of movement produced by *meaning*, as it propels itself from the end of one line into the next. Milton understood very well that words occurring in sentences form not just a chain of meanings but sequences of expectation and satisfaction that are an important part of the material which the poet shapes and controls. Although the line-juncture is the point at which this experience of varied onward movement can be most obviously exploited – and you only have to read a few lines of *Paradise Lost* to realize how much a part of the poem's distinctive and effective texture the varied enjambments are – it is never entirely absent from the reading process, and even though it is little talked about it is a permanently available poetic resource. Any utterance produces a constantly shifting sense of semantic weight and directionality; and reading always entails a continuous process of prediction, continuously modified as expectations are met, intensified, or disappointed. Moreover, these sequences of increasing or decreasing

semantic tension occur simultaneously over longer and shorter spans, so that, for instance, a local satisfaction may be part of a broader movement of expectation. Poetry exploits this dimension of language – which I shall call "phrasal movement" or just "phrasing" – to the full.

Thus meaning itself functions in poetry rather like pitched sounds in tonal music: organized into patterns and sequences, it provides the onward drive that impels the reader or listener from the beginning of a work to the end. Phrasing produces periods of slackening pace or gathering momentum, moments with differing degrees of initiatory or closural force, and varying kinds of coherence or disjuncture. Milton's inclusion of these *semantic* effects under the heading "true musical delight," which might at first seem a confusion of content and form, is thus perfectly appropriate. One familiar manifestation of this inseparability of signifier and signified is *repetition*, for the marked recurrence of an item of language in a poem repeats not just a series of sounds but also a meaning or series of meanings. However, repetition also constitutes a difficult area for any theory of verbal movement in poetry, and I shall turn to it in due course to see why this should be so – and how the resistance of repetition to theoretical accounts can illuminate the working of poetic language.[1]

Of course, it has usually been to the other poetic features named by Milton, "apt numbers" and "fit quantity of syllables," that we have turned in order to account for the experience of movement in a poem. Metrical analysis can show how different sequences of stressed and unstressed syllables (perhaps what Milton meant by "fit quantity") produce different rhythms with their own qualities of pace, weight, roughness or smoothness, and so on; and it can show how these patterns produce series of beats falling into sequences of varying length and providing onward movement, anticipation, and closure (perhaps what Milton meant by "apt numbers").[2] But metrical effects tend to be quite local, often extending no further than one line (though highly rhythmic forms like the ballad-stanza can carry

[1] Theories of poetic language are not the only ones to find repetition a problem; linguistic accounts also come up against its recalcitrance. Jean Aitchison's survey of such accounts at the 1993 SAUTE conference, printed in this volume, was qualified by the remark, capitalized on the handout, "It is difficult to make generalizations about repetition!"

[2] For a full discussion of this level of poetic movement, see Attridge *Rhythms*.

metrical expectation over several lines), and for the most part producing rhythmic variations that involve just a few syllables. Dynamic effects of meaning, however, can function across much wider spans. For an example, one doesn't have to go any further than the opening sentence of *Paradise Lost*, which lasts for 26 lines, from "Of Man's first disobedience . . . " to " . . . justify the ways of God to men," and maintains syntactic tension (in a complex, layered sequence of variations) throughout that extraordinary length. Semantic movement is not confined within the sentence, however; a sentence may produce an expectation of semantic climax in a following sentence, or delay arrival at an expected climax until a later sentence, or prolong the effect of the climax reached in a previous sentence. When we talk of phrasing, therefore, we do not limit ourselves to linguistically-defined phrases, but include effects of meanings and syntax operating over spans of any length.

The importance of syntax and sense in the experience of rhythm and movement in poetry has frequently been insisted upon, by poets like Milton and by many commentators on poetry and theorists of poetic form. But extended and systematic analysis has been rare, compared with the immense effort that has gone into the discussion of meter and its rhythmic effects and possibilities. However, a major step forward in this difficult territory has recently been taken with the publication of Richard Cureton's *Rhythmic Phrasing in English Verse*, a book which sets out a finely detailed theory of the shaping and patterning of poetic language over spans greater than those usually considered in rhythmic analysis.[3] In the discussion that follows, I am heavily indebted to Cureton's work, though I have chosen to use my own somewhat less systematic and detailed approach to these aspects of verse. However, a brief (and necessarily crude) summary of Cureton's arguments will set the stage for my discussion of movement and repetition.

Cureton – following the music theorists Lerdahl and Jackendoff – divides rhythm (which he defines in a very broad way) into three distinct components, which he terms *meter*, *grouping*, and *prolongation*. Meter involves the perception of beats in regular patterns, grouping involves the apprehension of linguistic units organized around a single peak of

[3] For a fuller discussion of Cureton's book than is possible or relevant here, see Attridge "Beyond Metrics."

prominence, and prolongation involves the experiences of anticipating a goal, arriving at that goal, and extending that goal by further elaboration. The major focus of Cureton's book is grouping, but it dwells sufficiently on the other two components to be able to present a coherent theory of rhythm – in this global sense – as the interrelation of events of these three kinds. Although the three components are separate, they all possess what Cureton sees as the crucial organizational feature of any kind of rhythm: strict hierarchical structure. A rhythm consists of a series of local events or units, perceived as more or less prominent elements within longer events or units, which are themselves perceived as more or less prominent elements within even longer events or units, and so on to the entire work.

Analyzing phrasal movement for Cureton involves examining the interrelated functioning of grouping and prolongation in a hierarchical organization. At the lowest level, words are grouped into "clitic phrases," each with a strong syllable and up to six weak syllables. At the next level, these clitic phrases are themselves grouped into units, one phrase in each unit experienced as strong and the others as weak. These units are grouped in their turn, and so on up to the highest level, which usually corresponds to the whole poem. Although grouping is influenced by phonological and syntactic considerations (at the lowest level, for instance, the stress-pattern is crucial, and at higher levels the boundaries of groups coincide with syntactic boundaries), the most important factor in determining the length of groups and the position of the peak is what Cureton calls "the informational organization of the text." Units are units of meaning, peaks are peaks in the poem's unfolding semantic and emotional drama. A grouping scansion is therefore an attempt to map not the poem's patterning of perceived sounds (as in the case of a traditional metrical scansion) but its patterning of meaning – though it is clear that in practice the two categories will constantly interrelate with and influence one another. In order to account for the way the reader groups potentially rhythmic stimuli, Cureton proposes a number of rules, reflecting both the preferences which readers follow in determining groups ("grouping preference rules") and the structural limits placed on groups by the perceptual mechanism ("grouping well-formedness rules").

Functioning in concert with grouping is prolongation, the reader's response to the existence in poetry of structural goals towards which or away from which the sense moves. Thus at any level of the prosodic hierarchy, there can occur sections of *anticipation*, *arrival*, and *extension*.

These sections usually correspond to groups. The movement involved in any sequence from anticipation to arrival or from arrival to extension can be of three kinds: *equative*, where the text pauses to repeat itself; *additive*, where the text progresses by means of analogy; and *progressional*, where prolongation occurs by means of a striking new experience. Cureton does not develop his theory of prolongation very far in this book, but it suggests a valuable way of approaching the question of movement in poetry, reflecting more accurately than the rather static notion of grouping the temporality of the poetic experience. In considering poetic repetition, prolongation is the most relevant aspect of phrasal movement.

II

To illustrate in a very simple way the operation of phrasal movement in poetry, let us take Blake's well-known poem "A Poison Tree," from *Songs of Experience*.

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe;
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I watered it in fears,
Night and morning with my tears;
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night
Till it bore an apple bright –
And my foe beheld it shine.
And he knew that it was mine,

And into my garden stole,
When the night had veiled the pole.
In the morning glad I see
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

(*Complete Poems* 212-13)

The opening two-line sentence is a self-contained movement: anticipation in "I was angry with my friend," continuation of that anticipation in "I told my wrath," and climactic closure in "my wrath did end." At the same time we experience, within these clauses, three shorter movements which we might describe as increasing in semantic weight (emphasis on "friend"), decreasing (emphasis on "told"), and increasing again (emphasis on "end"). The second sentence, syntactically very similar to the first, ends with a climax that is also a moment of strong semantic expectation: "I was angry with my foe;/ I told it not, my wrath did grow." The forward drive is not produced by anything formal or syntactic at this point (except perhaps our awareness that there are several stanzas to come); it derives from the semantic force of the word "grow" (in contrast to the earlier "end"). Within the clauses of this sentence, we experience three consecutive sequences of increasing weight, since the new information comes at the end of each sequence (emphases on "foe," "not," "grow"), the rest being repetition. The parallelism of syntax between these two sentences, therefore, is countered by difference in inner movement.

The sentence that follows does little to satisfy the anticipation aroused by the opening stanza; rather, it increases it by expanding on the implications of "grow":

> And I watered it in fears,
> Night and morning with my tears;
> And I sunned it with smiles,
> And with soft deceitful wiles.

There is no feeling of resolution in this sentence, just a series of postponements as we wait for the outcome of this nurturing process. The internal movement is balanced; there is little sense of increasing or decreasing weight until the two adjectives that provide strong anticipation before our arrival at the key Blakean word, "wiles." The second half of the stanza parallels, and is to that extent an extension of, the first half, but there is enough of a new turn in the second half – the unexpectedly pleasant demeanour of the speaker towards his enemy – to propel the reader forward.

The next sentence begins with a summary statement that delays arrival at the semantic goal for one more line, then at last reaches the statement that provides fulfilment:

> And it grew both day and night
> Till it bore an apple bright –

(Notice how the semantic progression is signalled by the conjunctions: "And . . . And . . . And . . . And . . . Till . . . .") The appearance of the beautiful fruit has central importance within the poem, which is concerned with the way hatred can take effect through ingratiating behaviour. Still, the culmination in "apple bright" of the sequence beginning with "grow" does not dissipate all the tension produced by the initial announcement of anger, and at the same time as we experience climax and closure at this level, we experience further anticipation over a longer span – anticipation signalled, of course, in the punctuation, and formally increased by our position midway through a stanza. The next line provides a climax to this longer span:

> And my foe beheld it shine.

The next clause, it seems to me, unpacks the implications of that climactic event, and so constitutes a continuation of it:

> And into my garden stole,

We sense more anticipation here: the action of stealing into the garden is clearly not the culmination of the sequence. But that culmination does not come immediately. The following line –

> When the night had veiled the pole. –

elaborates on and intensifies the action, so that although it ends the sentence it settles nothing and keeps the anticipation alive; in fact the introduction of "night" sets up a slight anticipation of its own.

The two-line sentence that follows is indeed the climax of the poem, though it achieves that climax with surprising economy. The tension established by the mention of night is resolved by the due appearance of morning, in a natural logic that suggests necessary sequentiality, but the point of view switches back to the speaker as we move not to the anticipated action – the eating of the fruit – but to its disturbingly gratifying effect:

> In the morning glad I see
> My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

The placing of "glad" renders it ambiguous: we might read it as qualifying "morning" (as in Blake's well-known print "Glad Day"), "I," or even, momentarily, "foe," though most readers probably settle on "I." This uncertainty increases the anticipation already produced by the adverbial phrase, which is then further increased by the verb "see" occurring in a strong enjambment that drives the reader on to "foe." This is not the true climax, however, since it is the enemy's state that culminates the narrative logic; "outstretched" therefore takes the full weight of the expectation, and prolongs it to the significant final word "tree," which names for the first time the symbol of the poet's destructive but disguised anger. (It is interesting to learn that as a notebook draft the poem was entitled "Christian Forbearance.") Meaning in the whole poem thus moves in two waves: first a ripple that takes only two lines, then an onward driving sweep, with its own inner rises and falls, that controls and gives life to the remaining fourteen.

It will be evident that what I've called "metrical movement" and "phrasal movement" don't operate in isolation from each other. Milton's focus on enjambment illustrates strikingly the importance of their interrelation, since a run-on line in regular verse is a point at which metrical closure (arrival at the last beat of a five-beat sequence, for instance) conflicts with semantic anticipation (since syntactic continuity always implies some degree of semantic continuity).[4] Enjambment is usually discussed more in terms of syntactic linkages than semantic ones;[5] this is perfectly appropriate as far as it goes, but leaves out of account the different kinds and strengths of expectation that may be set up by identical syntactic structures with different semantic contents. The relation between an adjective and a noun, for instance, will depend in part on whether it is a

[4] A third factor shows itself in verse like Milton's, where the enjambments are frequent and the metrical form – the iambic pentameter – is one without particularly strong closural properties: the graphic layout of the poem on the page, which strengthens, for the reader, the break at the line-ending. In most free verse, of course, this visual interruption of the semantic flow is the only kind possible, since metrical closure does not exist.

[5] See, for instance, the useful studies by Hollander and Sinclair.

familiar or an unexpected collocation, whether the informational weight at this point of the poem falls on the adjective or the noun, whether the adjective-noun sequence comes within a semantic peak or within a semantic trough, and so on. Semantic relations over longer spans are important, too: a relatively weak enjambment in terms of syntax and word-to-word semantic relations may be part of a larger forcefully forward-moving unit of meaning. An example would be lines nine and ten of "A Poison Tree," where the lack of syntactic and semantic connection between "night" and "till" produces a break that coincides with the line-end, while at the overarching level that takes in the whole couplet the impetus to move on is extremely strong. Syntax and semantics have to be considered together, then, in their relation to the metrical patterning of the poem, if we are to understand the production of "true musical delight"; and if this is the case, an understanding of the poem's musicality cannot be separated from an understanding of its play of meanings.

III

Repetition is, of course, a crucial feature of all poetry; as Jakobson realized in devising his famous definition of poetic language, poetic form depends upon equivalences – that is, implied repetitions – along the axis of succession. Even free verse relies, in its division into lines, on some kind of principled equivalence, and stricter forms of verse use repetition of syntactic structures, phonological patterns, rhythmic phenomena, and so on. What is especially valuable about the concept of repetition is that it highlights temporality (as does Jakobson's phrase "the axis of succession"), the *nacheinander* rather than the *nebeneinander* – even if it problematizes that very distinction.[6] An alternative such as "parallelism" has its uses, but, like Cureton's emphasis on grouping and his employment of visual metaphors and diagrams, risks reducing the experience of the poem to some kind of static, instantaneous or timeless, abstraction. Of course, temporality or successivity in poetry is not a simple matter; poems might be said to be made for re-reading rather than reading, and

[6] I am grateful to Adolphe Haberer for helping me to see the importance of this qualification.

though there's a sense in which every re-reading begins anew, there's also a sense in which a re-reading presupposes the simultaneous existence of the whole poem within the reader's consciousness. Nevertheless, in so far as a poem is an oral phenomenon (and poems vary in this regard) it is dependent on temporality – a sort of "staged" temporality if you like, rather than one which unfolds in real time.

What I want to focus on, within the context of this staged temporality, is *the immediate exact repetition of verbal material.*[7] I am leaving aside, that is, several types of repetition that occur commonly in poetry: repetition in conjunction with difference in various types of equivalence and in chiasmus, repetition of purely syntactic, metrical, phonic, semantic and other non-verbal material, and all those kinds of non-immediate, or postponed, verbal repetition which poets use constantly, whether structural, like the refrain, or occasional, like Blake's repetition of the word "wrath" and the sequence "I was angry with my . . . ."[8] 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. The other types of repetition raise many of the same issues, but they do not do so in as striking a way and are more easily assimilated to traditional aesthetic values and approaches. But 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.[9]

[7] Madeleine Frédéric, in her comprehensive treatise *La répétition*, calls this "répétition en contact immédiat" (46) or "répétition lexicale immédiate" (156). Gunnar Persson's *Repetition in English: Part I – Sequential Repetition* is a study of this phenomenon – which he terms "immediate and identical repetition of lexical items" (8) – as it occurs in contemporary spoken English. See also Tannen.

[8] I take the distinction between "structural" and "occasional" repetition – a fundamental one in discussing poetic repetition – from Barbara Herrnstein Smith's invaluable book, *Poetic Closure*. See also Tannen, chapter 3.

[9] In her suggestive essay on "The Paradoxical Status of Repetition," Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan makes a similar point, with the aid of a citation from Christine Brooke-Rose (153-54).

A poem's temporal dimension is a matter of directedness, of a movement from the beginning (in the past) to the end, somewhere ahead. As Cureton's analyses of prolongational effects demonstrate in great detail, the pace of this movement continually varies; at any given moment the language can be driving ahead, coasting in the wake of a dynamic climax, idling slowly forward, or cresting at a point of structural arrival. And as Cureton has also shown, this happens simultaneously over spans of different duration; a small-scale conclusion may be part of a larger-scale anticipation, which in turn may be part of an even larger-scale extension. Within the multi-layered onward movement, repetition of various kinds clearly plays an important role, and one that in its multiple effects is not easily analyzable.

We may recall that for Cureton, onward movement is termed "prolongation," and can occur as anticipation (leading towards an arrival) or as extension (moving away from an arrival by elaborating on it in some way). We may recall further that there are three types of prolongation, all of which may occur as anticipation or extension: equative, additive, and progressional. Within this analysis, repetition is included in the category of equative prolongation, which is described as "movement which does not significantly move" (147) – the whole problem of repetition being caught in this paradox (although it is not clear how aware Cureton is of the contradiction in his statement). "In poetry," he continues, "this 'pausal' movement is usually articulated by overt repetition or apposition. In moving towards or away from a goal, the text pauses on the path to name and rename some part of the path rather than getting on to the journey's end." By "apposition" Cureton appears to mean a semantic repetition that does not actually use the same words, and it is not difficult to see how this can qualify as equative prolongation: the poem is carried forward by its new language even while its meanings repeat what has gone before. This type of equative movement is only partially equative.

"Overt repetition" of the kind I am interested in is a little more problematic, however. It presents equative prolongation in the strictest sense, an unmoving movement that stalls the progress of the poem. Yet this raises the question of how such an event can produce the experiences of arrival and extension (the only two prolongational movements that Cureton identifies). The movement from a linguistic item to its exact repetition can be neither a sequence of anticipation and arrival nor a sequence of arrival and extension (since an extension is a moving away

from a goal by developing its implications). We have to conclude that equative arrival and equative extension in fact exclude the purest form of equativity, exact repetition, which remains something of an embarrassment to a theory of prolongational movement. This is not, I should add, a criticism of Cureton's impressive attempt to arrive at a systematic description; it is an indication of the odd status of repetition in poetic movement. If we turn to Cureton's theory of grouping, we find that exact repetition poses a difficulty here too. The peak of a rhythmic group – often also a point of prolongational arrival – is the point of greatest informational prominence (197-99), which would imply that a repetition, whose informational weight is zero, is the very opposite of a peak, a kind of ultimate trough or nadir.[10]

We know, however, that repetition of this exact and overt kind in poetry need not produce a sudden experience of total emptiness or nullity, a black hole in the poem – in fact, a repeated phrase or sentence can be a very positive addition, and we shall be looking at (or rather listening to) some examples shortly. But its effectiveness often depends on the way it is treated by the reader, since – as the bearer of no information whatsoever – it contains no indication of how it might best be read. Should it be treated as an additional emphasis that produces a climax? A post-climactic release of tension? Stalling or blockage? Momentary backward movement? Of course, in any given instance, the context of the repetition will limit these options, but the point I want to make is that the repeated item itself – in so far as it is read as repeated – cannot signal what kind of repetition it is. As a result, it will often pose a challenge to the schematic description of the rhythm and movement of verse.

Usually this challenge is experienced only as a momentary refraction in the apprehension of form and content; but occasionally a writer will exploit to the full repetition's resistance to interpretation. No-one has done so more exhaustively, not to say exhaustingly, than Gertrude Stein. A short passage will serve as a reminder of the extraordinary effect of her

[10] One of the difficulties of transferring theories of musical movement to language is evident here: despite some parallels, there is no real equivalent in music of the semantic dimension of language. Repetition in language works against informational progression in a way that cannot be equated with the operation of musical repetition.

repetitions, working over and over a limited set of words until they seem to be emptied of content, only to inject a fresh set, suddenly radiant in their meaningfulness, until they too lose their power to signify or refer. The following is a paragraph from "Patriarchal Poetry":

> Made a mark remarkable made a remarkable interpretation made a remarkable made a remarkable made a remarkable interpretation made a remarkable interpretation now and made a remarkable made a remarkable interpretation made a mark made a remarkable made a remarkable interpretation made a remarkable interpretation now and here here out here out here. The more to change. Hours and hours. The more to change hours and hours the more to change hours and hours.
> (*The Yale Gertrude Stein* 136-37)

Such writing defies analysis in terms of directional movement and arrival at goals; unanticipated peaks are provided by the irruption of linguistic difference, but they tend to melt away as the new series of repetitions begin.[11] I want to focus, however, on less extreme examples, moving from shorter to longer repetitions.

The least problematic form of immediate repetition is the repetition of *single words*. Known in rhetoric as *epizeuxis*,[12] it usually suggests a speaking voice at a moment where repetition would be a natural emotional outlet. King Lear's dying moments include several examples: "Howl, howl, howl!"; "Cordelia, Cordelia!"; "No, no, no life"; and, of course, "Never,

[11] Stein herself emphasized the slight differences which she continually introduced into her repetitions (see "Portraits and Repetition," in *Lectures in America* 165-206, especially 166-80, 195-96, 198). These variations are obviously important in providing a feeling of slight but continual movement that runs through even the most repetitive passages; but they can be appreciated only against the massive effect of the repetitions.

[12] A different type of immediate verbal repetition is *anadiplosis*, or what Frédéric calls "répétition lexicale pseudo-immédiate" (157), where a word that ends a syntactic segment is used again to begin the next one; Shakespeare's Sonnet 129 contains an example: "On purpose laid to make the taker mad;/Mad in pursuit, and in possession so." I am excluding this type from my discussion, as the repeated term is rendered different by its syntactic and semantic context. Persson makes the same exclusion (9-10).

never, never, never, never!" In the decisions which the actor faces as he prepares these lines one begins to see the way in which immediate repetition eludes interpretative rules.[13] Should he treat such a sequence as moving towards a climax on the last repetition, that is, as a prolongational sequence of anticipation and arrival? Should there be an attempt to equalize the repetitions, in order to bring out the deadening despair that produces this mechanically reiterating language? (This would produce either a group with no peak, which is impossible by Cureton's rules, or a series of one-member groups, which, according to those rules, we try to avoid.) Is the first utterance of the word the peak, followed by a series of weaker echoes? Or should the actor try for more varied effects, countering the repetition by giving a different value to each instance of the word? Of course there is no final answer, and different decisions will have different results.[14] It is hard to see how grouping preference rules would help here – which is not to cast doubt on the usefulness of such rules, but to demonstrate that the unique effect of repetition lies precisely in its evasion of rules.

Repetition of single words can also be used mimetically, as in the remarkable ending of Seamus Heaney's poem "A Constable Calls" (part of the sequence entitled "Singing School"). The deceptively simple poem describes from a small boy's perspective the visit of a policeman, by bicycle, to the family farm to check on the crops being cultivated. Here is the last stanza, suffused, like the whole poem, with a sense of the mundane become ominously, but indeterminately, meaningful:

> A shadow bobbed in the window.
> He was snapping the carrier spring
> Over the ledger. His boot pushed off

[13] The difficulties of categorizing different uses of immediate repetition in speech are evident from Persson's study; some of these can be gauged from his list of types alone – repetition is said to be "intensifying," "emphatic," "conjoined," "mimetic," "simple," or "purposive" (15-16). The author admits that these are not "watertight compartments" (17).

[14] Carruth observes, "I can arrange those five repeated *nevers* in a half-dozen ways that are easily enunciated and appropriate" – though this hardly means that the play is not "feasible in dramatic production," as he asserts (518).

And the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked.
(*North* 67)

Repetition is used here not just to mimic the slow clicks of the cycle's gear mechanism as the policeman rides away, but as a closural device – or more accurately, as an anti-closural device that nevertheless has closural force. Exact repetition is not in itself closural: it does not let the poem progress towards an end, but it does not bring it to a satisfying halt either.[15] All it does in itself is mark time, but without any internal information or structuring principle to suggest when it should stop. A word or line that has been repeated once implies an infinity of possible repetitions. However, the greater the number of repetitions, the more obvious their anti-closural effect; a single repetition can be read as an emphatic and final reiteration. We can rewrite the last line of Heaney's poem to show this:

His boot pushed off
And the slow bicycle ticked, ticked.

This, to my ear, has more finality than the original. What Heaney actually gives us is more suggestive of a continuous sound going on beyond the end of the poem, as it is of the boy's continuing meditation on the dark significance of the visit. If we rewrite the ending with no repetition at all, however, the power of the poem's conclusion is lost altogether:

His boot pushed off
And the slow bicycle quietly ticked.

In this example there's little sense of the interpretative blockage I talked about in relation to Lear's words: the dominance of the mimetic effect *requires* a repetitive reading, perhaps a diminuendo, like the fade-out

[15] Smith points out on several occasions that systematic or structural repetition in poetry is an anti-closural force (42, 48, 57, 157), but she identifies nonsystematic or occasional repetition as an effective closural device (155-66). Although she confines her examples of closural repetition to formal patterning such as internal rhyme, alliteration and assonance, she mentions "the recurrence of whole words and phrases" (161). My argument is that the latter operates in part like structural repetition, especially if the repetition occurs more than once.

of a recorded piece of music. What it does make problematic is a grouping and prolongational analysis; the final repetition produces a peak and an arrival – perhaps the climax of the whole poem – only by virtue of the repetition, and not by virtue of its semantic content. (My last rewrite indicated how the significance of "ticked" is reduced when it occurs only once.) An additional grouping preference rule to deal with this phenomenon might help, but – as a preference for linguistic emptiness – it would operate against the rule which states a preference for peaks that are linguistically dense.[16]

Immediate repetition of *short phrases* is rarer than immediate repetition of single words, but when it occurs it usually produces similar effects. A well-known example – this time in a prose speech – is Hamlet's:

> You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will not more willingly part withal – except my life, except my life, except my life. (II.ii.215-17)

No doubt many readers and auditors have agreed with Coleridge's comment that this repetition is "most admirable" (I, 24), but it is hard to say exactly why. (Coleridge didn't attempt it.) Hamlet's richly varied language, full of the rushes and sallies of rhythmically orchestrated phrasing, suddenly starts reiterating itself like a stuck needle as he confronts his own death-wish (which Freud, we may remember, linked closely to the phenomenon of repetition-compulsion). Once again, an actor may choose to speak it as a crescendo or a diminuendo instead of an uninflected repetition, or with three different tonalities, but however he does it, it represents a resistant moment in the text, a moment where the mobile forward-moving energy that animates almost every literary work is suddenly thwarted.

An example of a repeated phrase which functions closurally like Heaney's ticking bicycle, but is expressive rather than mimetic (though the example contains a mimetic single-word repetition as well), is the close

[16] Grouping preference rules are not necessarily consistent with one another, however; Cureton points out, for instance, that our preference for a grouping peak of unusual linguistic density usually runs against our preference for peaks that are informationally and physically "heavy" (244). It may be that some poems achieve forcefulness by pitting preferences against one another.

of Sylvia Plath's scathing account of marriage, "The Applicant." Here are the last three stanzas:

> Now your head, excuse me, is empty.
> I have the ticket for that.
> Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
> Well, what do you think of *that*?
> Naked as paper to start
>
> But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
> In fifty, gold.
> A living doll, everywhere you look.
> It can sew, it can cook,
> It can talk, talk, talk.
>
> It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
> You have a hole, it's a poultice.
> You have an eye, it's an image.
> My boy, it's your last resort.
> Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.
>
> (*Collected Poems* 221-22)

Unlike the Heaney example, I find this ending extremely difficult to read. There's no question mark – clearly this is less an offer than a command – and the repetition (itself repeating a phrase already used twice in the poem) seems to produce a kind of sheer linguistic violence, increasing in intensity as the meaning is emptied out. Once again, it is hard to see how a grouping or prolongational analysis would capture what is happening in this most powerful of conclusions.[17]

[17] Another example of "expressive" closural repetition, but one which is tonally very different, is the ending of D. H. Lawrence's "Song of a Man Who Has Come Through":

> What is the knocking?
> What is the knocking at the door in the night?
> It is somebody wants to do us harm.
>
> No, no, it is the three strange angels.
> Admit them, admit them.
>
> (*Complete Poems* 250)

Immediate repetition of *longer phrases or sentences* is much rarer, and reveals even more clearly the way in which repetition poses an obstacle to our norms of poetic processing. It is almost always occasional, though one fairly familiar type of structural use is in poems that deliberately imitate the form of the blues, like the following opening stanza of Langston Hughes's "Blues at Dawn":

> I don't dare start thinking in the morning.
> I don't dare start thinking in the morning.
> If I thought thoughts in bed,
> Them thoughts would bust my head –
> So I *don't dare start thinking in the morning.*[18]
> (*Selected Poems* 261)

In this example, of course, we hear the strains of a blues melody as we read, and the repetition can be said to work "musically" to restate the opening theme and at the same time to postpone, and hence increase anticipation of, the climax that comes in the third and fourth lines – which in a more typical blues would be the end of the stanza.[19]

One of the most effective exploitations of the peculiarly resistant power of the immediate repetition of a long phrase is the strangely potent ending of Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," which will be our final example. It is worth quoting the whole poem.

> Whose woods these are I think I know.
> His house is in the village though;
> He will not see me stopping here
> To watch his woods fill up with snow.

Notice that the first phrasal repetition in the excerpt functions as a kind of anadiplosis, since the repetition is part of a new syntactic and semantic unit and thus shorn of some of its quality of pure repetitiveness.

[18] It is interesting to note that blues singers, and Hughes's imitations of blues songs, usually vary the immediate repetition slightly, if only with an added initial "Oh . . . ."

[19] In music, of course, where semantic directionality is not at issue, repetition can be used much more freely and with much less drastic effects – the employment of the da capo symbol is not a sign of flagging creativity. Read outside that context, the repetitions seem merely laborious.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
(*Complete Poems* 250)

Throughout its length, the poem progresses without strong prolongational effects; it is, after all, a poem about stopping when one would be expected – by the human community, even by the habituated horse – to go on. The lack of onward drive contributes to the eery stasis of the lines

The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

Although the first of these lines uses weak enjambment to enhance the movement on to the second, contributing some mimetic power to "sweep," that moment of potential vigour is quickly dissipated by the adjectives "easy" and "downy" and the nonprogressional form of the line (which is itself repetitive in ways that I'm not discussing here: syntactic and metrical).

The last stanza begins with a line that at the level of the longest groups probably ought to be read as the final constituent of a group that began at the start of the poem, a group that deals with the snowy woods and – by implication – the temptation they represent to the speaker. Within that long group it stands on its own as a summary of that temptation, the underlying theme of the poem up to this point. Whether it constitutes a prolongational arrival I'm not sure; certainly in the word "lovely" something that has only been implicit is now admitted, and the unspoken desire to leave the commitments of the world to join that lovely darkness is

almost voiced. At any rate, the emergence or near-emergence of that desire prompts an immediate counter-movement: the last three lines constitute a group that sets against the rest of the poem the demands of the human community. Within this final group, the prolongational structure is unexpected: the climactic arrival occurs in the first line, and the next two lines constitute an extension, spelling out the effect of the "promises" which have to be kept – whether one takes the statements at face value (there are duties to be performed before the speaker can go home) or as a comment on the life that has to be lived before the dark loveliness of death can be embraced. Even the different rhyme-word that has appeared in the third line in previous stanzas is now replaced by a repetition, increasing the sense of a playing-out of what is already implicit.

But what is the effect of the repeated line? It is itself a "dead" moment, a stopping where we would expect forward motion and final arrival, contentlessness at a point where we are being reminded of the fullness of human meanings. Though it's in the place of closure, it has an effect that, as we have already noted, is characteristic of repetition: having recurred once, there is no intrinsic reason why it should not go on occurring to eternity. It's hard to see on what grounds one could call the repeated line the peak of a group or the climax of a prolongation, and yet it puts its mark on the whole poem, intensifying its suggestiveness and deepening its hitherto somewhat whimsical tone. We can read it as the expressive repetition of a dramatic speaker, as we read the repetitions of Lear and Hamlet, although it presents even greater obstacles to definitive interpretation than those examples. Is it the repetition of firm resolve? Or of a sleepy letting go that signals the defeat of that resolve? If we take it not as the representation of inner speech but as the poem's way of concluding, of playing with the idea of conclusion, we might say that the very enunciation of a forward drive – the travel that lies ahead – is caught up in the necessarily, and endlessly, repetitive structure of verse (and ultimately of language). The temptation of the dark woods – the temptation to repeat endlessly instead of moving on[20] – has been resisted at the level of the will,

[20] For an interesting consideration of the relation of repetition to timelessness, focussing on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, the Hindu *Upanishads*, and Kierkegaard's *Repetition*, see the final chapter of Kawin's *Telling It Again and Again*. Rimmon-Kenan also refers to Kierkegaard's *Repetition* in commenting, "Complete

but at the level of discourse it remains an essential part of what it is to promise, to speak, to think.

For meaning itself is grounded in repetition; the never-before-experienced, the wholly other, is meaningless, not even available to perception. At the same time, as I think my examples have indicated, there is actually no such thing, in the temporal movement of a poem, as an exact repetition.[21] We cannot, after all, draw an absolute line between repetition and non-repetition; every apparently new appearance, if it appears, is constituted or mediated by the familiar; every repetition, repeating itself in a specific here and now, freshly contextualized, is different. The second occurrence of Frost's line is not the same as the first, most importantly in that, unlike its predecessor, it is a *repeated* line. (But then the first line, once we know it is about to be repeated, is no longer the same either.) Perhaps we do, after all, find exemplifications in poetry of that paradoxical event, "equative arrival." As I've tried to show, repetitions in literature resist many of our strategies of interpretation and constitute irreducible moments of otherness, but this is not, as I may seem to have implied, because they mark an absolute difference from the way language in the literary text usually goes about its business. On the contrary, the trouble we have with repetitions – pleasurable and perhaps profound trouble, I should add – is not ultimately distinct from the trouble we have with the cultural practice we call literature, whose statements are not quite statements, whose references do not quite refer, and whose variously drawn-out movements never allow themselves to be fully and finally mapped.

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repetition... is death or – if one prefers – eternity" (155); and she mentions as one of the paradoxes of repetition: "Although repetition can only exist in time it also destroys the very notion of time" (158).

[21] Rimmon-Kenan's first paradox is "Repetition is present everywhere and nowhere" (151).

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