Repetition as Openness in Literature: How Does Repetition Include the Reader in the Creative Process?

Prokos, D.

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Dimitris Prokos

Dimitris Prokos was born in Athens, Greece in 1993. He majored in classics (BA) and acquired a master's degree (MA) in literary studies (Modern Greek Literature) from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. Since April 2021, he has been conducting research regarding the functionalities of repetition in poetry as part of a PhD thesis under the supervision of Prof. D. Angelatos. Over the past few years, he has been working as an elementary school teacher of modern Greek language and literature, while moonlighting as a part-time professional musician with the Athenian group Dury Dava.

Repetition seems to escape definition and analysis. Even though it has, in many cases, found its place among the lines in literary criticism, it is still characterized by a peculiar conceptual status, which has been said to be in essence "paradoxical" (Rimmon-Kenan 151). As a result, scholars most often avoid dealing with the notion altogether. There is a relatively simple reason for this: repetition is a universal phenomenon – literature is only one, very specific field under its general influence. Thus, studying repetition in literature requires a set of appropriate theoretical aims and methodological tools. The same can be said concerning the notion of openness in literature, as the term has been used in various ways, leaving itself quite *open* to additional commentary. Among other things, this article aims to show how repetition, both intra- and intertextual (Metzidakis 53), supports the open work of art and the aesthetic values it promotes.

This relationship between openness and repetition is something we must delve into before reaching the main body of our argumentation. Umberto Eco (*Open Work* 4) states that all works of art are open to a certain degree, as they require reception, interpretation, and performance in order to actualize their inherent potential. Similar ideas are expressed by Wolfgang Iser, who believes that "reading causes the literary work to unfold its inherently dynamic character" (275). In a later stage of his seminal book, Eco presents his view of openness as "the guarantee of a particularly rich kind of pleasure that our civilization pursues as one of its most precious values, since every aspect of our culture invites us to conceive, feel, and thus see the world as possibility" (*Open Work* 104). It follows that the open work of literature acknowledges its potential and somehow tries to grant the reader access to it (9).[1]

1 This aspect of openness as potentiality is closely related to our choice of *Cent mille milliards de poémes* by Raymond Queneau of the Oulipo group (standing for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*) as an example. Queneau's own conception of the group's objectives concerns "the search for new forms that may be used by writers in any way they see fit" (qtd. in Motte. *A Primer* 2-3), thus alluding to the way works should *educate* readers.

Now what does repetition have to do with this? Eco himself, alongside Girard (7), refers to the fact that, for classical aesthetics before the 19th-century, repetition in the form of mimesis was preferred to innovation (*Innovation and Repetition* 191), while the latter gradually became dominant in modern times and is still at the core of contemporary artistic creation in the context of the open work (Nankov 66). Here lies the *paradox* we mentioned above, concerning the notion of repetition: it represents formal confinement, the realization that possibilities are not endless, while at the same time embodying progress and possibility itself. Eco accepts and supports this oxymoron, as he writes about 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" (*Open Work* 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.

The notion of recognizability is key to our view on repetition as openness. A conscious reading subject cannot ignore the fact that in Poe's "The Raven," to use a well-known example, certain words or phrases are constantly reiterated throughout the text. Each of these occurrences invite the reader to take part in a two-fold process: on one hand, the reader recognizes iterativity *per se* and derives pleasure "from the sense of identity," as the poet himself writes in his "Philosophy of Composition" (1300). 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 (Iser 278). Repetition then oscillates between two poles of communication: meaning and information (Rogers, *Semiotics of Repetition* 584). As Eco states in *The Open Work*, meaning is the product of

recognition and understanding,[2] while information is "an unchecked abundance of possible meanings" (94); repetition embodies both of the above, as an inherently recognizable and polysemic textual phenomenon (Rogers, *Redundancy in Ambiguous Texts* 602).

This paper argues that these faculties of repetition help the reader gain access to the text. As we recognize repeated occurrences, we form meaning in the first degree of practical communication (Eco, *Open Work* 94). We thus understand the text in the simplest way possible, that of words in the form of sentences, which are organized in a certain way and indicate what is to come, while at the same time influencing what has passed (Iser 278, 288). In this spatio-temporal conception of reading,[3] repetition serves as a textual *landmark*, a universally acceptable point of interest in the body of the text, both spatially and temporally. Through acknowledging and memorizing these *landmarks*, the reading subject succeeds in grasping the text as a formal totality. This is how repetition produces plain meaning in the form of "conventional symbols," which, as Eco thinks in relation to music, characterize a *traditional*, closed work, and obliges "the eventual performer to reproduce the format devised by the composer" (*Open Work* 3). In the case of "The Raven," for example, the reader obviously does acknowledge the author's intention in enriching the "artistic effect" and "piquancy" (Poe 1300) of his work through the use of the refrain. But how does granting the reader access to specific techniques and choices of composition imply closure rather than openness? In our view, it's the other way around.

Repetition as meaning provides the reader with an example of authorial creativity. In the historical context of the closed work, this example might not have been practically useful, because the reader supposedly thought of the creative process as unknown territory, only discoverable by a gifted subject who composes "by a species of fine frenzy" (Poe 1297). But contemporary literary theory has taken a decisive turn towards

2 It should be mentioned that Metzidakis moves a step further to state that "repetition is that process which allows the reader to grasp any meaning whatsoever" (50).

3 See also Hillis-Miller (93).

openness, notably shifting the weight from the independence of aesthetics to the importance of poetics (Robey xiii). This shift leads us to think that reading as a dynamic, dialectical process (Iser 294) now has an explicitly "educational" role; reading is the first step towards writing. In other words, we argue that works are characterized by different degrees of openness according to the historical conditions of their creation, but what is most important is the reader's perceptive faculties. As Walter Benjamin believed, "what is regressive or progressive is determined not by the form of the work, not primarily by the visual constitution or content of the image, but by the conditions of its perception" (Haxthausen 61). The work suggests its potential meanings; the reader realizes these meanings by any means available.

It is all a question of potentiality then. When Raymond Queneau composed his "Cent mille milliards de poèmes" ("One Hundred Thousand Billion Poems," first ed. 1961), 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,[4] texts and meanings. His collection of ten sonnets, each comprising fourteen lines following the formal tradition, is an excellent example of the *paradox* we have been dealing with in this essay. 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 our 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.

In this short article, we have tried to point out some of the very many aspects of repetition in relation to the open work of literature. By no means

4 According to Queneau's own calculations, going through all possible sonnets (1014) "would demand more than a million centuries of reading, at a rate of eight hours a day, two hundred days a year" (Quenneau qtd. in Motte, *Early Oulipo* 47).

has this essay been exhaustive or even complete in its way of treating theoretical concepts and textual examples. Its goal has been to introduce the reader to an interesting discussion, which, for reasons very briefly mentioned here, has not been given enough attention, although interest has been growing in the past few years.[5] If we have succeeded in channeling to the reader at least some meaning and information, or something in between, we consider the effort to be worthwhile.

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5 Repetition was attracting significant amounts of scholarly interest for a decade or so, around the 1970s and 1980s, following the publication of central works by Gilles Deleuze ("Difference and Repetition") and Jacques Derrida ("Signature, Event, Context"). More recent scholars have been studying the role of repetition in music and poetry (see, for example, Margulis, *On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind*, and Mazur, *Poetry and Repetition: Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery*).

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