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Repetition and Parallelism in Tony Harrison's Poetry

Hans Osterwalder

Repetition, whether conscious or subliminal, is one of the hallmarks of literary texts. It is certainly one of the central elements of what Roman Jakobson has called the poetic function of language:

The set . . . toward the MESSAGE as such, focus on the message for its own sake is the POETIC function of language . . . The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination. Equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence. (256, 259)

The principle of equivalence on the axis of combination means the repetition of similar elements in the syntagmatic speech-chain. Hopkins was one of the first poets to consciously recognise its paramount importance in literature. He claimed that "the artificial part of poetry, perhaps . . . all artifice, reduces itself to the principle of parallelism," which manifests itself in "the structure of verse – in rhythm, the recurrence of a certain sequence of syllables, in metre, the recurrence of a certain sequence of rhythm, in alliteration, in assonance and rhyme" (quoted in Jakobson 250). It all boils down to saying that repetition is the constitutive device of the metaphoric principle of Jakobson's bipolar scheme of language, the dichotomy between metaphor and metonymy. Analyses of the metaphoric elements in literary texts abound: Jakobson himself set a daunting example in his reading of Shakespeare's sonnet 129. However, an exclusive focus on the repetition of similar elements can result in notable aridity, arriving at conclusions which border on the banal. In fact, Jakobson's analysis of sonnet 129 is a case in point. Paul Werth successfully reduced Jakobson's approach to absurdity by demonstrating the similar occurrence of repetition or parallelism in a randomly chosen newspaper

article and one of William McGonagall's works. He concludes that "the existence of parallelism is neither diagnostic of literary value nor characteristic of poetry, but is in fact, an essential of all language" (72).

In this paper I propose a more fruitful application of the same rationale to Tony Harrison's poetry. Repetition is obviously an important element in a poet who at one stage in his life took a solemn vow to write nothing but verse, the form of writing in which repetition features most prominently. What is indeed very striking about Harrison's work in general is his dogged pursuit of metrically regular, rhymed forms of poetry. As Alan Young pointed out, "the rhyming couplets of 'A Kumquat for John Keats' may take some getting used to in an age which has deliberately avoided using such forms" (162). In a time swamped by free verse and even prose poems excessive repetition of similarity elements may grate on the audience's ears. In fact, Bruce Woodcock even raised the objection that "the pronounced facility with which Harrison handles formal verse leads him into a prolixity near to doggerel" (55).

The mainspring for Harrison's clinging to regular, traditional verse forms and a language abounding in the traditional rhetorical devices like alliteration, assonance, parison, metaphor, symbol etc., i.e. constant repetition on the various levels of the linguistic hierarchy, is his desire to pit "a school of eloquence" against his inarticulate working-class background. He wants to beat the oppressive middle-class culture at its own game by appropriating its traditional forms. The poem in which this is expressed most candidly is characteristically entitled "On Not Being Milton":

On Not Being Milton

for Sergio Vieira & Armando Guebuza (*Frelimo*)

Read and committed to the flames, I call
these sixteen lines that go back to my roots
my *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*,
my growing black enough to fit my boots.

The stutter of the scold out of the branks
of condescension, class and counter-class
thickens with glottals to a lumpen mass
of Ludding morphemes closing up their ranks.

Each swung cast-iron Enoch of Leeds stress
 clangs a forged music on the frames of Art,
 the looms of owned language smashed apart!
 Three cheers for mute ingloriousness!

Articulation is the tongue-tied's fighting.
 In the silence round all poetry we quote
 Tidd the Cato Street conspirator who wrote:

Sir, I Ham a very Bad Hand at Righting.

note: An "Enoch" is an iron sledge-hammer used by the Luddites to smash the frames which were also made by the same Enoch Taylor or Marsden. The cry was: Enoch made them, Enoch shall break them!

(Selected 112)

The central statement of the poem is contained in the last line, which is an example of what's called "a lumpen mass of Ludding morphemes" in lines 7/8. The unorganised mass of the Luddites, the 19th-century working-class revolutionaries, serves as a metaphor for purely sequential unstructured speech. But the historically accurate transcript of inarticulate working-class speech is embedded in a highly organised, stylised framework of devices of patterned repetition. The ordering of this amorphous mass of morphemes is compared to the working-class revolutionaries "closing up their ranks," that is to say the establishment of military order to increase their combatting capacity is put on a par with the turning of working-class speech into a traditional poetic pattern of repetition. The 16-line sonnet is a repetition of Meredith's *Modern Love* sequence, which is in turn a repetition-cum-variation of the traditional 14-line sonnet. As the Luddites smashed the cast iron weaving-frames made by the industrialist Enoch Taylor with the slogan, "Enoch made them, Enoch shall break them," so Harrison enables the working-class conspirator's voice quoted in the last line to break out of the silence of his "mute ingloriousness" into the highly organised discourse of traditional poetry, smashing "the frames of Art," the traditional literary canon with its ideological bias. Harrison has pointed out that "frames" is Milton's term for poetic forms in his poetological

writings.¹

The title of the poem and the phrase “mute ingloriousness” allude to Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” so it represents a repetition-cum-rejection of a literary topos. This is spelt out in the pun on the last word of the last line (‘writing’ versus ‘putting things right’) in the quotation of normally unrecorded working-class speech: the entire lopsided canon of literary texts ought to be corrected, put right. At the same time it is an instance of the appropriation of the structured discourse of repetition which the poet achieves on behalf of his inarticulate working-class forbears, a way of patterning their chaotic “stutter” to break out of the “branks of condescension” (“branks” being an instrument of punishment with a sharp metal gag which restrains the tongue); here this gag is imposed by the literate upper-class on the illiterate workers.

But characteristically Harrison’s poem is based on a working-class cry in which syntactic repetition is paramount: “Enoch made them, Enoch shall break them.” Harrison claims that English in general, including its substandard variants, tends to fall into a regular iambic pattern. In his sonnet “Confessional Poetry” he refutes hypothetical objections to his dogged pursuit of regular metrical forms in the following manner:

But your father was a simple working man,
they’ll say, and didn’t speak in those full rhymes.
His words when they came would scarcely scan.
Mi dad’s did scan, like yours do, many times!

(*Selected* 128)

According to Harrison (and he clearly has the backing of linguists there) repetition on the morphophonemic level is a constitutive element even in purely sequential, colloquial speech. But in the poem repetition is foregrounded by its recurrence on the various levels of the linguistic hierarchy: semantically the most striking feature is the parallelism between the cast-iron weaving-frames fabricated by the industrialist Enoch Taylor

¹ A comment given at a reading in Zurich on Dec. 8, 1983. The passage he has in mind is to be found in “The Reason of Church Government,” in John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merrit Y. Hughes, Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1957, 669.

and the frames of traditional art. But this breaking up of frames of parallelism and repetition is itself couched in a framework of highly organised recurrent devices.

Another example of the use of repetition to break out of the shackles of inarticulation is the poem "Book Ends":

Book Ends

Baked the day she suddenly dropped dead
we chew it slowly that last apple pie.

Shocked into sleeplessness you're scared of bed.
We never could talk much, and now don't try.

*You're like book ends, the pair of you, she'd say,
Hog that grate, say nothing, sit, sleep, stare . . .*

The "scholar" me, you, worn out on poor pay,
only our silence made us seem a pair.

Not as good for staring in, blue gas,
too regular each bud, each yellow spike.

A night you need my company to pass
and she not here to tell us we're alike!

Your life's all shattered into smithereens.

Back in our silences and sullen looks,
for all the Scotch we drink, what's still between's
not the thirty or so years, but books, books, books.

(Selected 126)

The entire poem is framed by the central theme, books. The first word of the title is emphatically repeated three times at the end of the text. The initial b in the first word of the first line is repeated in the final word. The title "Book Ends," which is a repetition of the mother's words quoted in line 5, describes the father – son relationship. They're sitting in front of the

fireplace, mute, like the purely material devices used to prop up books, with the rows of books, metonymies for education, between them. The mass of books is iconically represented by the threefold repetition of “book” in the last line. The “end” of the title symbolically refers to the end of the mother’s life, who acted as a link between father and son. Her end is also the end of the kind of mediated relationship between father and son. My reading shows that a complex network of mirrorings and repetitions structure the poem, iconicity being a visual repetition on the signifier-level of a semantic concept on the level of the signified.

There are further striking repetitions on the morphophonemic level, namely the frequency of the recurrence of /b/ /p/ and /s/ /z/ sounds: the poem repeats the basic phonetic pattern set by the keyword “books”: the /b/ /p/ sound is repeated 21 times, the /s/ /z/ even 40 times! The phonetic pattern of the title could be seen as the contrast between father and son, /b/ and /s/ being iconically separated by the double *o* standing for the books between them. This may be somewhat speculative, as it is not possible to allocate the /b/ /p/ mainly to the father and the /s/ /z/ to the son, but the frequency of the recurrence of the same phonetic contrast might be seen as a case of subliminal repetition corroborating a pattern of conscious semantic recurrence.

Harrison doesn’t only write poetry in order to come to terms with his working-class background. In his later work he reaches out for larger themes, mainly the archetypal struggle between life and death, stressing the fact that the feast of life is increasingly threatened by extinction in our materialistic, technological age. Our expectation that in view of the large issues addressed constant recourse is made to parallelism and repetition as ordering principles is borne out. One of his most remarkable poems where this features very prominently is “Cypress and Cedar.” The two trees of the title recur as symbols of an archetypal contrast throughout the poem. The first line “A smell comes off my pencil as I write” is repeated with a slight variation 156 lines later in the final line: “the smell coming off my pencil as I write.” The first stanza adumbrates the basic themes recurring throughout the entire 26-stanza poem:

Cypress and Cedar

A smell comes off my pencil as I write
in the margins of a sacred Sanskrit text.

By just sufficient candlelight I skim
 these scriptures sceptically from hymn to hymn.
 The bits I read aloud to you I've Xed
 for the little clues they offer to life's light.

(Selected 200)

The speaker is sitting in darkness: writing and reading in dim candlelight offers some insight into life's mystery; the candlelight/darkness contrast is to recur in the 18th, 23rd and 24th stanza. The first word "the smell" is the leitmotif running through the entire poem, it fuses the manifold metaphors repeating the same basic theme. On the morphophonemic level the recurrence of 22 sibilants is striking, it constitutes some kind of susurrus creating an atmosphere of softness and warmth. The first two lines of the second stanza establish the fundamental contrast on which the poem hinges: "I sit in mine, and you sit in your chair. / A sweetness hangs round yours; a foul smell mine."

This theme is repeated and elaborated on in the fourth stanza:

Beside two piles of shavings, white and red,
 one fragrant as a perfume, and one rank
 and malodorous from its swampland ooze,
 Bob displayed that week's work's chairs for me to choose.
 I chose one that was sweet, and one that stank,
 and thought about the sweet wood for a bed.

Bob, the local sawyer, stands between two piles of wood shavings, a fragrant red one stemming from cedar and a stinking white one from cypress which reminds of the primeval ooze of the Florida swampland, the locale in which the poem is set. However, instead of being directly contrasted, the fundamental opposition cedar/fragrant/red versus cypress/rank/white is chiastically arranged in this stanza, thus varying the pattern of direct binary opposition which dominates the poem. Another contrast set up here is the one between the malodorous swampland suggesting the primeval mud from which life emerged and the sweet cedar smell intended for the bed. In fact, as Harrison pointed out in an introduction given to a reading of the poem, sexuality is one of the main subjects: the bed is a metonymy for the sexual union of the lovers which potentially creates new life. But this is put into an olfactory contrast to the

origin of all life in the swamp, a theme recurring in stanza 12: "Cypress still has roots in that old stew / paddling its origins in protozoa, / the stew where consciousness that writes and reads / grew its first squat tail from slimy seeds." This repetition of one basic contrast embeds another repetition, namely the reading and writing leitmotif of the opening stanza, which is taken up again in stanzas 17 ("though most evenings on the porch I read and write") and 20 ("This consciousness of ours that reads and writes,") with a final echo in the final line "The smell coming off my pencil as I write."

Explicit mention of the two trees of the title with their concomitant scents is not made until stanza 5. In the sixth stanza a third smell is introduced: when he was sawing fenceposts, a tough knot in the wood jolted the chainsaw at the speaker's face, spraying "beetroot cedar dust . . . along with damp earth with its smell of rot." This third smell, replacing the binary repetition by a tripartite division, clearly stands for decay and death; but even death can be perfumed by sweet cedar, as illustrated in the continuation of this motif in the following stanza:

To get one gatepost free I had to tug
for half an hour, but dragged up from its hole
it smelled, down even to the last four feet
rammed in the ground, still beautifully sweet
as if the grave had given life parole
and left the sour earth perfumed where I'd dug.

The phallic connotations of the cedar-gatepost are obvious: the beautifully sweet cedar standing for the life-giving sexual potency can even perfume the "sour earth" identified with the grave. The phrase "as if the grave had given life parole" may even contain a vague echo of the Persephone myth, in view of the more explicit classical references in stanzas 13 to 15: the house is situated between the Suwannee River and the Styx, named thus by "some homesick English classicist" drinking himself to death in this primeval swampland, lacking the sweet comfort of a "wife with a clothes chest of sweet cedar." The basic sweet/rank contrast permeating the poem is expanded here to the female/male opposition: the woman keeps her underwear, her "doffed bras," in a chest of cedar, so that her "body breathes out cedar while she sleeps." This represents a sensory contrast to the English classicist drinking "sourmash," a whisky made from fermenting grainmash, sterile loneliness being associated with the "sour

earth," i.e. death. From the very beginning of the poem the speaker himself is sitting in the rank cypress chair, so the male/female opposition is established immediately.

However, in the last third of the poem images of union and reconciliation of opposites win the upper hand:

Peace like a lily pad on swamps of pain –
floating's its only way of being linked.
This consciousness of ours that reads and writes
drifts on a darkness deeper than the night's.
Above that blackness, buoyed on the extinct,
peace, pure-white, floats flowering in the brain,

and fades, as finally the nenuphar
we found on a pewter swamp where two roads ended
was also bound to fade.

The archetypal binary contrast between life and death is repeated in a number of metaphors and similes: peace/lily pad/white versus pain/swamp/blackness, floating on the surface versus the darkness of the deep, darkness versus light and consciousness. The blending of the two smells of cypress and cedar is the all-embracing metaphor illustrating the reconciliation of all these opposites:

The head and heart
are neither of them too much good apart
and peace comes in the moments that they're blended
as cypress and cedar at this moment are.

Love is the state or act in which this union is achieved:

My love, as prone as I am to despair
I think the world of night's best born in pairs
one half we'll call the female, one the male,
though neither essence need, in love, prevail.

The recurrent candle-image is also used to illustrate this final merger: "moments like this now when heart and brain / seem one sole flame that's bright and straight and still." The fire metaphor is continued in stanza 25,

where the speaker envisages his death and imagines a blending of the rank cypress smell of his body and the sweet cedar fragrance of the coffin in the smoke resulting from cremation. The final unifying image is achieved by the repetition of the motif of the first stanza in the last:

“Tvashti,” says this Indian Rig Veda,
 “hewed the world out of one tree,” but doesn’t tell,
 since for durability both do as well,
 if the world he made was cypress wood; or cedar
 the smell coming off my pencil as I write.

In conclusion we can say that the 156-line poem is held together by a complex system of parallelisms and repetitions mainly on the semantic level, the title representing the leitmotif encompassing the entire network. The iambic pentameter line and the six-line stanza rhyming abccba constitute a unifying system of repetition on the morphophonemic level. The rhyme scheme iconically reflects the final fusion of opposites: the a-rhymes are at the largest possible remove from each other, whereas the c-rhymes are adjacent, touching each other as the lovers do.

Another example of an even longer and more intricate mesh of parallelisms and repetitions is *v*. The occasion of the 528-line poem is the poet’s visit to the graveyard where his parents are buried. “Some skinhead Leeds supporter” (1.3) has sprayed graffiti on all the tombstones; apart from the usual four-letter words, *V*. and UNITED are the most prominent scrawls. The entire poem hinges on the manifold symbolic meanings of these two words, their repercussions in the poet’s mind and their significance for the world at large:

These Vs are all the versuses of life
 from LEEDS v. DERBY, Black/White
 and (as I’ve known to my cost) man v. wife,
 Communist v. Fascist, Left v. Right,

class v. class as bitter as before,
 the unending violence of US and THEM,
 personified in 1984
 by Coal Board MacGregor and the NUM,

Hindu/Sikh, soul/body, heart v. mind,

East/West, male/female, and the ground
 these fixtures are fought out on's Man, resigned
 to hope from his future what his past never found.

(v. 11)

The concentrated repetition of this "versus," the fundamental binary oppositions on which the human condition is based, is evident. But this leitmotif is not restricted to the three stanzas quoted, it recurs throughout the poem and is contrasted with another graffito on his parents' stone, namely UNITED. This "accident of meaning" (15) triggers off a long chain of associations in the poet's mind. The desecrating scrawl on the gravestone accidentally expresses the parents' certainty of being united in heaven; simultaneously it makes the poet aware of a similar longing within himself: his general desire for union is concretized in his need to be sexually united with his woman here and now, "Home to bed / where opposites seem sometimes unified" (26). He also wishes this UNITED for the nation, which at the time of the writing of the poem was torn apart by the miners' strike. His final plea is contained in two of the last stanzas, where he presents a proleptic vision of his own grave:

If love of art, or love, gives you affront
 that the grave I'm in's graffitied then, maybe,
 erase the more offensive FUCK and CUNT
 but leave, with the worn UNITED, one small v.

Victory? For vast, slow, coal-creating forces
 that hew the body's seams to get the soul.
 Will Earth run out of her "diurnal courses"
 before repeating her creation of black coal?

(v. 32)

As in "Cypress and Cedar" the perspective is widened to a view of the timespan of creation in geological terms: the v. could also stand for victory, in this case some unknowable life-force ("vast, slow, coal-creating forces") which helps man transcend mere matter to reach his spiritual essence: the recurrent offensive FUCK and CUNT, standing for fleshly reproduction, can be erased to make room for the small v symbolising the victory of some

hidden spiritual power.

For reasons of space I have to restrict myself to this brief presentation of the constant use of repetition on the semantic level in Harrison's longest poem to date. As stated at the outset, repetition is one of the constitutive devices of all language, and above all of literary texts. The use of leitmotif and symbol is to be found in most poetry. But the pervasive presence of repetition on all levels of the linguistic hierarchy is indeed striking in Harrison's work. In comparison with the countless "vers libristes" at large today, his poetry embodies Jakobson's poetic function, namely the use of repetition and parallelism, to a remarkably high degree and with a remarkable measure of success in terms of poetic quality.

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