The purpose of this paper is to clear the ground for a poetics of repetition, leaving the actual development of such a poetics for another, much larger, study. It may seem strange that a clearing of the ground should take the form of paradoxes, but such is the nature of the phenomenon as well as of the "symbolic order" (Lacan, 1966) to which it belongs. Such also is the nature of the self-reflexive and self-doubting theories which this article follows: Lacan, Derrida, Barthes, and the so-called Yale School. Like them, I shall point out some aporias that semiotics cannot escape, and like them (though not like the strawman they sometimes become), I shall present these paradoxes not as a rejection of semiotic analysis but as "the name of a question" (for a similar view of deconstruction, see Culler, 1979:137-141).

Although repetition (in the broad sense of happening, doing, experiencing, saying over again) permeates nature, human life, the various arts (music, painting, dance, literature) and many disciplines (philosophy, psychoanalysis, history, education, communication theory, linguistics, poetics), I shall restrict myself here to two kinds of narrative texts: prose fiction and the discourse of the unconscious. The similarities that may emerge from the joint consideration of the two may be illuminating for both and have become "thinkable" owing to the contemporary, linguistically oriented, return to Freud by Lacan and his followers in France as well as in the USA.

Paradox 1: Repetition is present everywhere and nowhere.

Repetition can operate on the constituent elements of any sign, either separately or together, as well as on different kinds of signs. Thus, in a
discussion of poetry, Jean Cohen (1976: 413–422) distinguishes between repetition of the sign, of the signifier, of the signified. The first type includes repetition of words, phrases, sentences, refrains, complete stanzas; the second — homonymy, alliteration, assonance, rhyme, meter, syntactic structures; and the third — synonymy and pleonasm. In all these cases, repetition manifests the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to that of combination, a quality which Jakobson (1962: 296–322) considers the manifestation of what he calls the poetic function.

In narrative, signifier and signified have been identified with the récit and the histoire respectively (Genette, 1972: 71–76). Cohen’s classification, applied to these aspects of narrative, yields the following definitions: a repetition of the whole sign is a re-telling of an event in the récit in exactly the same words, by the same narrator, the same focalization, etc.; a repetition of the signifier uses the same discourse (i.e. récit) elements to narrate different histoire-events, while a repetition of the signified narrates the same histoire-event using different discourse-elements. At a higher level of abstraction, one may pose functions, and not events, as the signified, and these may be repeated either by the same event or by different events. Similarly for characters, the signified may be a role or an actant (Greimas, 1966). A repetition of the sign, in this sense, will occur when one actant is always associated with one character, a repetition of the signified when the same actant is realized in different characters, and a repetition of the signifier when one character functions as different actants. Narration itself, as well as its counterpart — reading — are often conceived as repetitions, but because the relations between signifier and signified in these repetitions will be taken up, in a different form, in paradox 3, I shall not go into detail here.

In psychoanalysis, Lacan’s topology of the unconscious, with the signifier over the signified (S/s), explains the return of the repressed as the unconscious-signified “speaking through” a symptom-signifier (1966: 253–267). A repetition of the same repressed material, whether in compulsive neurosis or in transference, may take different symptomatic forms, just as the same symptom may substitute for different unconscious signifieds.

While the foregoing enumeration was intended to emphasize the ubiquity of repetition in the discourses under consideration, it also betrays its non-presence or non-existence as a pure phenomenon. The very distinction between repetition of the signifier and that of the signified implies difference at the heart of repetition, for when the signifier is repeated, the signified changes, and vice versa. But even when the whole sign is repeated, difference is introduced through the very fact of repetition, the accumulation

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1 I cannot here go into the ways in which Lacan’s view of signifier and signified differs from Saussure’s, nor is it strictly necessary for my purpose. Lacan himself expresses conflicting opinions about the relationship between the two parts of the sign in psychoanalysis.
of significance it entails, and the change effected by the different context in which it is placed. We never go into the same river twice, and no pure repetition exists.

This paradox may seem at first a mere matter of definition. If we include the word ‘partial’ in the definition of repetition (as Kawin does, 1972: 7; Kawin in fact speaks of “near repetition”), or insist (as Genette does, 1972: 145) that repetition is an abstraction, a mental construct attained by an elimination of the specific qualities of each occurrence and a preservation of only those which it shares with similar occurrences, we seem to get rid of the paradox. But a related paradox immediately appears: beyond mentioning the fact of repetition, we can say nothing about it except through a discussion of differences. The very notion of a repetitive récit (Genette, 1972: 147) depends on a difference between the number of occurrences in the histoire and in the récit (1H/nR) (if the number is identical, the récit is labelled ‘singulative’). And the minute we discuss repetition, we are bound to mention variables like narrator, focus, mode, degree of amplification, narrative transformations, place in the continuum, and many others. Similarly, a discussion of transference as repetition is impossible without dwelling on two crucial variables: the analyst as a substitute for the original object of desire, and the eventual passage of the experience from the unconscious to the conscious.

Thus there is no repetition without difference and no difference without repetition, and each can only be discussed in terms of the other. Re-asserting, rather than solving, this paradox, Deleuze proposes to “faire de la répétition la pensée et la production de l’absolument différent” et faire enfin que pour elle-même, la répétition soit la difference en soi” (quoted by Ferraris and Agostini, 1978: 85).

Paradox 2: Constructive repetition emphasizes difference, destructive repetition emphasizes sameness (i.e., to repeat successfully is not to repeat).

Focussing again on the relations between sameness and difference in repetition, this paradox is clearly related to the first, but whereas the first was concerned with definition and description, the second has to do with evaluation. Although, as she says, “theory, in theory, does not evaluate,” Christine Brooke-Rose (forthcoming) addresses herself precisely to this problem:

But clearly more work needs to be done on the problem of why the very same features that are considered the privileged marks of the poetic function (features that structure the text) should also, when hypertrophied and rendered

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2 I am grateful to my student, Pearl Muken, who kept pointing this out to me in my graduate seminar on repetition in literature and other sign-systems.

transparent, become the very same features of, let us say, the unpoetic function, or the way the poetic function collapses.

The term ‘hypertrophy,’ taken over from Hamon’s discussion of redundancy as a mark of readability in realistic discourse (1974: 411-445), already hints at a solution. The danger is that of over-sameness, of a repetition that repeats itself without variation. In her attack on Tolkien, Brooke-Rose herself complains of the “endless repetition of the same devices” (forthcoming) and adds:

It is in my opinion the reduplication of adjuvants that seriously weakens the structure, in other words one of its weaknesses is due to exaggerating and making explicit an element inherent to or at least often found in the Marvellous, but more symbolically (e.g., triplication), and often not even evident at the surface.

Repetition of *actants*, it seems, is tolerable as long as it manifests itself through difference. On the other hand, if this deep-structure repetition repeats itself at the surface it is considered a weakness.

Kawin (1972:4) similarly distinguishes between the repetitious, i.e., recurrence without additional force, which he condemns, and the repetitive, i.e., recurrence that adds force and intensity, which he glorifies. And Jakobson’s poetic function, we must remember, is defined by equivalence, parallelism, symmetry, i.e., repetition with a generous infusion of difference.

A similar evaluation emerges from Freud’s speculations. Some repetitions, it transpires, serve the pleasure principle, while others seem to manifest a death instinct. And when we search for the distinguishing feature between the two, we find that it is again the proportion of difference within the repetition. The child’s game of throwing the reel away and then pulling it back as an enactment of his mother’s departure and return is a successful, constructive, ultimately pleasurable repetition, because by passing from a passive situation of being overpowered by his mother’s absence to an active situation where he inflicts the same fate on the various objects within his reach, the child gains mastery over the disagreeable experience (Freud, 1961: 9–11). Analogously, what makes repetition in transference therapeutic, though not directly pleasurable, is the crucial difference between the original unconscious experience and its bringing to consciousness in the analytic session. Without this difference, one would dangerously substitute a permanent transference neurosis for the original one.

On the other hand, what characterizes those repetitions associated with the death instinct is over-sameness:

Thus we have come across people all of whose human relationships have the same outcome: such as the benefactor who is abandoned in anger after a time by each of his *protégés*, however much they may otherwise differ from one another, and who thus seems doomed to taste all the bitterness of ingratitude (Freud, 1961: 16).
In this “perpetual recurrence of the same thing” (16) sameness overrides difference (“however much they may otherwise differ from each other”), and it is in this that such repetition is akin to the conservative instincts, the instincts opposed to change and difference, the urge “to return to the inanimate state” (32), to the “inertia inherent in organic life” (30). Inertia, the quiescence before and after human life, is a state of undifferentiated matter, of over-sameness, and it is perhaps only in such a state that complete repetition is possible. Complete repetition, then, is death or — if one prefers — eternity, as Kierkegaard says from a religious standpoint (1964: 126), both being, however, beyond life and beyond narrative.

Paradox 3: The first time is already a repetition, and repetition is the very first time.

Since repetition is defined as happening, doing, experiencing, saying again, it would seem that the first time is the only occurrence that cannot be a repetition and similarly that repetition cannot possibly be the first time. And yet these impossibilities, as well as their paradoxical combination, become possible within both psychoanalysis and literature. This paradox is closely related to another (and it is difficult to know which of them creates which). The notion of repetition implies that something is repeated, and yet in both narrative discourses under consideration this something is not unequivocally a ‘presence’ but also, quite possibly, an ‘absence’ (i.e., a “nothing”).

One of the most famous examples of repetition in Freud’s writings is the fort/da game alluded to in the previous paradox. The details are important:

What he [Freud’s grandson] did was to hold the reel by the string and very skilfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive o-o-o-o [interpreted as ‘fort’ by Freud and the child’s mother]. He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful ‘da’ [there] (1961:9).

This game, itself “repeated untiringly” (9), involves a double repetition. Even the first staging of the disappearance and return of objects is, for the child, a repetition of the distressing experience of his mother’s departure and re-appearance (8–10). And the words which accompany the game repeat the same binary opposition in the medium of language. What is repeated, however, is an absence rather than a presence: both the mother’s absence and the repression of this absence which “absents” the experience from the child’s consciousness. The repetition of this “absent” experience thus becomes its very first performance. Similarly, the accompanying exclamation, like all language, “manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing” (Lacan, 1966: 204, trans. in Wilden, 1968: 84), thus clearly springing from an absence, just as desire, according to Lacan, arises from and is sustained by the loss of its object. Lacan elevates the fort/da game to
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a myth dramatizing the coincidence of the humanization of desire and the child's birth into language:

We can now grasp in this fact that in this moment the subject is not simply mastering his privation by assuming it, but that here he is raising his desire to a second power. For his action destroys the object which it causes to appear and disappear in the anticipating provocation of its absence and its presence. His action thus negatives the field of forces of desire in order to become its own object to itself. [...] Moreover, the child begins to become engaged in the system of the concrete discourse of the environment, by reproducing more or less approximatively in his Fort! and in his Da! the vocables which he receives from it (1966: 203, trans in Wilden, 1968: 83).

The process of transference also manifests the double status of repetition. In it, the patient repeats the repressed material, but this repetition takes the form of a contemporary experience in his relations with the analyst rather than of a reconstruction of something from the past.

We may say that the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it. [...] As long as the patient is in the treatment he cannot escape from the compulsion to repeat; and in the end we understand that this is his way of remembering (Freud, 1958: 150).

Repetition is thus not a reproduction of an antecedent presence but a production as "a piece of real experience" (154). And what this present experience repeats is again an absence. "In these processes it particularly often happens that something is 'remembered' which could never have been 'forgotten' because it was never at any time noticed — was never conscious" (Freud, 1958: 149). What this paradoxical formulation clarifies is that the repressed is an absence for the patient; it cannot even be 'forgotten' because it was never 'present' to the patient's mind. And if this absence is "repeated" in the process of transference, the repetition becomes in a sense the first presence, the first "performance," of the absence.

Moreover, according to Lacan, the repressed is not only absent in the sense of being unknown to the patient but also in the sense of never having occurred in his life: "it is less out of anything real [...] than precisely out of what never was, that what repeats itself springs" (trans. in Johnson, 1978: 504). If Freud is right that most infantile repressions have to do with the Oedipus complex, the castration complex and their ramifications, then these obviously represent events which have not occurred. A male child has not been castrated by his father for his desire to sleep with his mother; he has only interpreted the absence of a penis in the female as a castration which threatens him. The trauma is one of interpretation, not of real occurrence, as Barbara Johnson aptly puts it, and consequently:

Psychoanalysis is in fact itself the primal scene it is seeking: it is the first occurrence of what had been repeating itself in the patient without ever having
occurred. Psychoanalysis is not itself the interpretation of repetition; it is the repetition of a trauma of interpretation called “castration” or “parental coitus” or “the Oedipus complex” or even “sexuality” — the traumatic deferred interpretation not of an event but as an event which never took place as such. The “primal scene” is not a scene but an interpretative infelicity whose result was to situate the interpreter in an intolerable position. And psychoanalysis is the reconstruction of that interpretative infelicity not as its interpretation, but as its first and last act. Psychoanalysis has content only insofar as it repeats the dis-content of what never took place (Johnson, 1978: 499).

The parallel paradox in literary narrative is the well known clash between the mimetic and the non-mimetic status of narration as repetition. In mimetic theories of different kinds and degrees, narration is seen as a repetition of an antecedent presence, be it reality, fictional reality, fabula, or histoire. Nor is this merely something which theorists impose on literature. In fact,

Narrative always makes the implicit claim to be in a state of repetition, as a going over again of a ground already covered [...] This claim to an act of repetition — “I sing” “I tell” — appears to be initiatory of narrative. (Brooks, 1978: 285).

But narrative also makes the opposite claim. The very fact that it is written in language makes the notion of representation problematic. “Language,” says Benveniste, “reproduces reality. This is to be understood in the most literal way: reality is produced afresh in the interpretation of language” (1966: 25). Narrative, we can argue, also repeats by creating, and what it repeats is the absence from which it springs and which it renders present through its creation. It is in and through narration that “reality” exists, and the only true reality in narrative is that of the narration itself.4

Reading, traditionally conceived as a repetition in the sense of decoding what was previously encoded, can also be turned against itself and become a performative, rather than a constative, repetition. “Whichever way the reader turns, he can but be turned by the text, he can but perform it by repeating it” (Felman, 1978: 101). The reader of James’s “The Figure in the Carpet,” for example, finds himself engaged in the same search repeatedly dramatized in the story and ambiguously treated in it. He too asks: “What is the figure in the carpet?” referring — from his position — not only to Vereker’s carpet but also to James’s. This repetition, particularly salient in texts constructed around a central gap (but in a sense all texts are), is analogous to the process of transference in that it performs an absence as a present experience, and, as Brooke-Rose and Felman have amply shown, it characterizes not only so-called naive readings but also — perhaps most of

4 Substantial parts of the section on transference and narration are based on my analysis of the double status of narration in Absalom, Absalom! (Rimmon-Kenan, 1978: f17-f19). It appears that one always repeats, either others or oneself — which is again a repetition of what the Israeli poet Shlonsky once said.
all — sophisticated professional interpretations. Analyses of The Turn of the Screw show that “the state of the governess is contagious. The critics reproduce the very tendency they so often note in the governess [...]” (Brooke-Rose, 1976: 268). Or in Felman’s words:

The scene of the critical debate is thus a repetition of the scene dramatized in the text. The critical interpretation, in other words, not only elucidates the text but also reproduces it dramatically, unwittingly participates in it (Felman, 1978: 101. For the whole analysis of The Turn of the Screw: 94–207)

Such a perspective is akin to Derrida’s attempts to reverse the traditional tenets of metaphysics:

In determining being as presence (presence in the form of the object or presence to self in the form of consciousness), metaphysics could not treat the sign other than as a passageway. It even confounded itself with such a treatment. This treatment did not arise additionally to the concept of sign. Passage, gangway between two moments of full presence, the sign then functions only as the provisional deferent from one presence to another. The gangway may be raised (Derrida, quoted by Heath, 1971: 16).

What bothers me is that both the raising of the gangway and its preservation can be justified by the notion of ‘repetition,’ and this is so — I believe — because repetition is a perplexingly double-edged phenomenon.

One could multiply the paradoxes beyond narrative and observe, for example, that although repetition can only exist in time it also destroys the very notion of time (and almost any Borges story can illustrate this), or quote Kierkegaard’s “What is repeated has been... but precisely the fact that it has been gives to repetition the character of novelty” (1964: 52), but enough has been said to suggest the problematic, double-edged nature of the phenomenon. To put this double-edgedness in the form of paradoxes and to preserve these paradoxes rather than explain them away is not to renounce a semiotic analysis of the types and functions of repetition but to emphasize the contradictions which underlie the kind of analysis we do, and must, perform as semioticians. What this implies, beyond the specific notion of repetition, is that through the “deconstructive” gesture semiotics (or poetics) becomes — in Kristeva’s words — both a critical science and a critique of science (1968). It is perhaps a final paradox that the critique of science, involving as it does a questioning of metalanguage which plunges us into the realm of paradox, almost inevitably uses the very metalanguage it renders problematic. “Il n’y a pas de metalangage” (Lacan, 1966: 11) is, after all, a metalinguistic statement.

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PARADOXICAL STATUS OF REPETITION


