Imagination and Repetition in Literature: A Reassessment

I

Paul Valéry, setting forth the general character of mental images, spoke of their "indefinitely repeated regeneration," their "curious cyclical substitutions." If Valéry is correct, imagination and repetition are linked intrinsically, and it would be wrong to suppose that the two phenomena are disjunctive. Yet just this supposition is commonly made. It is often assumed, for instance, that imagination only projects toward the future while repetition is confined to replicating what is past. Not so: imagining can concern itself with possibilities which stem from the past, repetition can direct itself into the future, and both acts take place in the present. Furthermore, far from being mutually exclusive, imagination and repetition are capable of conjoint action, combining in projects in which the activity of either one alone would be insufficient.

Literature represents one such project, a project in which imagining and repeating are continually co-ingredient. But literary critics and theorists have for the most part considered these two acts only in strict separation from each other. The assumption has been that they lie on opposite sides of the metaphysically determined dividing line between subject and object—between author and reader on the one hand and the literary work on the other. Thus, whenever imagination is accorded a position of honor, this position is almost invariably located on the side of the subject. In this regard, it does not matter whether imagining is envisioned as unfettered creativity (as in the Romantic conception of the poetic genius) or as musing reverie (as in Bachelard's description of the psychic state of the reader of poetry): either way, it is viewed as a phenomenon

belonging exclusively to an individual's subjective psyche. In contrast with this subjectification of imagining, repetition has generally been regarded as an element of the objective structure of the work of art. As a result, repetition is most frequently discussed in terms of basic rhythmic or rhyming patterns or in terms of narrative structure. As epitomized in formalist and structuralist trends in criticism, repetition is presumed to be psyche-independent, an aspect of the literary work understood in its objective being.

Yet in each instance there is another side to the story. First of all, the significance of imagination in literature cannot be confined to the writer's creative acts or to the reader's psychic processes. Imagining is constitutive not only of the subjective experiences of the creator and appreciator but also of the literary work itself. This work cannot be reduced to its visual or aural givenness. It also presents a world to its reader—a world in whose construction imagining plays an essential and not a merely decorative role. Such a world is imaginative in status, serving as a setting for the particular objects and events depicted in the work. Secondly, and conversely, repetition in literature is more than a structure of literature. As such, it cannot be reduced to the duplication and reduplication of objective structures. It is also present as a specific activity undertaken by writers, readers, and critics alike. "We are compelled or induced," says Valéry, "to repeat our enveloping maneuver indefinitely... [Art] consists in a development of sensations tending to repeat or prolong what the intellect tends to eliminate or transcend."  

What is called for is a less exclusive, more expansive notion of the place of imagination and repetition in literature. Perhaps it is the case that images are immanent in, and even necessary for, the objective structure of the literary work, and that repetition in turn is rooted in the mental activity of human subjects who are engaged in the work as creators, critics, and readers. Could it be that imag-

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3 Valéry, "The Idea of Art," p. 28. The first sentence is italicized in the original.
Edward Casey

imagination and repetition are bivalent, each being stationed on both sides of the metaphysical division between subject and object? But if so, this very division, which has convertly controlled so much of literary theory and practice, must come into question. Instead of employing models marred by subject-object bifurcations, we need to reconceive literature as an indeterminate and open sector of experience in which such seemingly disparate phenomena as imagination and repetition would each have a place. Viewed this way, the literary work becomes capable of indefinite extension in and through the activity of the reader or critic, while remaining a single identifiable whole whose parts cohere with one another.

There is an additional advantage in espousing a conception of literature in which imagination and repetition are allowed to become continuous with each other and, acting in tandem, with the literary work itself. We are freed from having to choose between antithetical views of imagination that depict it as, on the one hand, a form of productivity ex nihilo or, on the other, as a trivial divertissement. In other words, if imagining can be shown to involve elements of repetition in its own characteristic activity—elements which serve to stabilize an inherent manic tendency—we shall not be forced to opt between Romantic exaltation and structuralist suppression. For the true significance of this alternately glorified and vilified faculty emerges only when we acknowledge the affinity between imagination and repetition and thus their intimate interaction within the literary work and within literary experience.

II

Understood at their most basic level of activity, both repetition and imagination have to do with absence. We repeat, in the mind or in our behavior, what is not present or what is about to become non-present (in this latter case, we often repeat precisely to forestall absence). Through acts of repetition, we attempt to reinstate or keep present what is actually or potentially absent—absent from present perception or possession, unavailable to action or cognition. If direct presence were continually and unproblematic-
ically available, there would be no need for repetition; but human experience knows no such paradisiacal state of permanent *parousia*. Hence the act of repetition represents a response to the absence which haunts human being-in-the-world. Similarly, imagination can be seen as a means of coping with the inevitable unfulfillment of human desires and expectations. What we imagine always has, in Sartre's apposite term, an "intuitive-absent" character. The aim of most imagining is to render present to intuition what is absent from the senses, memory, or intellect. When Wittgenstein remarked that "while I am looking at an object I cannot imagine it," he might have added that in just such a situation there is no need to imagine it.

But imagining and repeating are not only parallel to one another as two ways of dealing with absence. They are also deeply implicated in each other. When I attempt to repeat something, I must often at the same time imagine what precise form such a repetition will take or what its effect will be. And when I imagine an absent object or event, I am repeating it in my mind—reinstating it there, however hastily. But two cautionary remarks are in order at this point. First, the imagining which occurs in connection with repeating need not be explicit in form. In certain cases, e.g. when I am acting from a repetition compulsion in the psychoanalytic sense, the imaginal element will be removed from conscious awareness, although it will still exist as what psychoanalysts significantly call an unconscious "imaginé" or phantasy. Secondly, the repeating that takes place in

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6 As conceived by Freud, the repetition compulsion is in part a result of repressing unconscious phantasies which are unacceptable to the ego or super-ego. Thus the compulsion to repeat expresses a refusal to acknowledge such phantasies. On this point, see Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), pp. 24-30; and Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973),
Edward Casey

imagining is not merely reproductive. Strictly reproductive repetition in the psyche is the work of memory, whose aim is to bring back before the mind a now-absent object or state of affairs, thereby re-producing the past object or event in psychic terms. (Thus, in Freud's model of memory, the "perceptual identity" which is established between the specific content of a given memory and the remembered event allows the memory to repeat the past reproduction.) Yet repetition in the mind need not be reproductive in the manner of memory, and it becomes non-reproductive precisely when it occurs in conjunction with imagining.

In imagining, we are not confined to the plane of recollected presence. The presence with which imagining is concerned may never have been—and may never be. As a consequence, its manner of repetition differs essentially from the strictly replicative repetition which is realized in recollection. For in imagining it is not always and not merely a matter of imitating or prolonging a pre-existing experience, but of making the mind a witness to genuinely new aspects or types of experience, to which nothing actual or historical has to correspond. Nevertheless, despite its newness, imagined content remains intrinsically bound up with repetition. How can this be? Are not novelty and repetition inherently incompatible?


7 In Freud's view, the perceptual identity established in intense (quasi-hallucinatory) memories is "a repetition of the perception which was linked with the [former] satisfaction of a need" (The Interpretation of Dreams, trans. J. Strachey, in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud [London: Hogarth Press, 1971], V, p. 566).

It differs still more from the intellective repetition or rediscovery of conceptual insights. This latter mode of repetition formed a paradigm for Husserl. (See his essay "The Origin of Geometry" in The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, trans. David Carr [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970], pp. 353-378. Cf. also Jacque Derrida's Introduction to his French translation of the same essay: L'Origine de la géométrie [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962].) In all of these cases—from the reproductive activity of recollection to the repetition of conceptual insight—we witness an effort to conceive of repetition on the classical Greek model whereby we are limited to repeating the same (event, insight, etc.). As Deleuze shows, the achievement of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in this regard was to consider repetition on the basis of a new model, in which sameness ("Le Même") is no longer the critical term. Cf. Deleuze, Différence et Répétition, pp. 12-20.
The link between repetition and novelty is not to be reduced to the mere fact that a given repetition is always "new" insofar as it is another occurrence, a re-enactment, of what has been. Kierkegaard has given a telling description of this minimal sense of novelty:

The dialectic of repetition is not easy; for what is repeated has been, otherwise it could not be repeated, but precisely the fact that it has been gives to repetition the character of novelty. 9

In this view, the novelty of repetition in imagination is merely temporal in character; such novelty amounts to the trivial truth that every event is temporally individuated and hence numerically different from every other event. But there is a more significant sense of newness in imaginative repetition. This has to do with the way in which imagining can effect an active re-creation of possibilities—possibilities which have been predelineated, but not necessarily actualized, in previous experience. The imaginer seizes upon such possibilities, actively reconstituting them as authentic psychic presences. Insofar as these presences have not been actualized before, they are genuinely new—new at least within the imaginer's own experience. Although preconstituted within the unlimited reservoir of possibilities on which the imaginer draws, their selection and development by his imagining mind is an innovative action, a leap from predelineation to imaginative re-creation.

What the mind thereby brings before itself in imagining is strikingly insubstantial. The re-creation is only of a pure possibility—i.e., of a possibility qua possibility, not as a would-be reality. Being purely possible, what we imagine is characteristically evanescent: hence our propensity to describe it as "elusive" and "fleeting." When unsupported by objective structures, imaginings become phantomlike, streaking across consciousness like disembodied ghosts. "One glimpse and vanished," says Beckett. "Impoverished," adds Sartre. 10 Both point to a basic trait of free imagining: the projection

of ephemeral objects and events which, lacking the substantiality of perceived presence, disintegrate before our very (mental) eyes.

Precisely because of this rapidly vanishing quality, what we imagine freely calls for repetition. Only by successive re-creation can imagined content be maintained in mind and thus acquire continuity and cohesiveness. Without repetition, such content collapses into a mere congeries of fragmented forms. The employment of formal redundancies is one effective way of combatting the disintegrative tendency of free imagining. In literature, these redundancies or patterns of repetition (patterns which are metric, alliterative, thematic, etc., in character) give shape to the imagined world of the work—a world which would otherwise sink quickly into incoherence. The same repetitive patterns delimit and guide the movements of the reader's imagination. Without the shaping force of repetition, this imagination is tempted to wander aimlessly beyond the bounds of the work and its world.

Far from eliminating the possibility of repetition, then, imagining in its very elusiveness makes repetition all the more essential as a means of containing and structuring its own vagaries. Imagining must allow its caprices to be constrained through successive recreations and through a recourse to repeated formal patterns if it is to attain the minimal consistency necessary to any coherent experience, including the experience of literature. In other words, not only does imagination imply repetition: it requires it in order to become a truly formative imagination. As formative, imagining shapes inchoate content into the form of a world. This world, though purely possible in ontic status, is fully formed; and it can become so only if repetition combines with imagination in genuinely conjoint action, an action of repetition-in-imagination.

III

The experience of literature is sometimes conceived as a verbalized reverie, as a daydream in words. Bachelard, for example, considered himself as a reader of poetry to be a "dreamer of words." But in what way do words constitute the fabric of the literary work?
Not merely as remembered from past readings, and not even, strictly speaking, as perceived in the actual activity of reading. The words of the work, though no doubt initially apprehended by means of perception, memory, and anticipation, become most effective at an *imaginal* level. In literature, words crystallize into images, and the poetic image, as Bachelard himself says, is "a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche." 11 This is not to hold, however, that the language of literature is imaginary in the pejorative sense of "merely imagined." When the words of the work are imaginatively effective, they are capable of constituting the world of the work.

Therefore, instead of being the ultimate intentional objects of the reader's attention, perceived, remembered, and anticipated words serve as the outward bearers (*Träger* in Max Scheler's term) of the work's world, shoring up this world and making it accessible to the mind of the reader. This means that the words of the work, though first of all presenting themselves as empirical entities (i.e., as stably stationed in textual space), come to make imaginative presences available to the reader—presences which populate the intangible world of the work. For such a world to arise, there must be a transformation of the work's material texture, of its lettered surface.

Contrary to what certain contemporary critics have claimed, literature is not all text. Beyond its explicit phonemic and graphemic texture, and beyond even its morphemic stratum, the literary work is also composed of an imaginative dimension which is its world. This world, though supported by the materiality and semanticity of the verbal text, is nonmaterial and nonsemantic in nature. As a product of the formative imagination, the world of the work is a "schematic formation" which is only adumbrated by patterns of sound, sight, and sense. 12 Thus, a given character in a novel


Edward Casey

is represented schematically by a series of descriptive and expressive terms, phrases, and sentences which characterize him as a particular fictitious being co-existing with other equally fictitious beings in a certain imagined situation, as performing certain imagined actions, etc. The totality of such beings, actions, and situations goes to make up the specific world of the work. As imagined, this world and its contents (in contrast with the text that supports them) are purely possible; if a certain character is described as “plump” and “timid,” each of these adjectives refers to a form of possible being, and not to a concrete trait which actually qualifies a sensuously given substance. 13 In the intricately detailed worlds of the novel, and in the much more momentary and diffuse worlds of lyric poetry, no such substances are to be found, only imagined entities and events.

As world-presenting, therefore, the literary work of art is as insubstantial in its being as an ordinary daydream. In both instances, imagination is operative in specifying structures which are materially empty (disembodied, void, and thus indefinite), yet capable of being characterized by an expansive range of possible predicates. In literature as in reverie, the principle is the same: the transcending of determinate empirical elements opens up an arena in which free imagining can take place. Schematicness of structure entails freedom of imaginative maneuver within an amorphous and open-ended field of possibility. But such freedom properly belongs to literary experience only if the indefiniteness of possibility is matched by a corresponding definiteness of form. Such definiteness is achieved primarily by means of repetition. In a given poem or novel, the reduplication of phrase, metric scheme, or theme establishes limits and parameters for a matrix of possibilities. Within this matrix, which is properly the matter of the work, what Novalis called the “magical idealism” of imagination is allowed to develop and

13 Thus a poem is an utterance which is “the representation of what might have been said” (Barbara H. Smith, Poetic Closure [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968], p. 19; my italics). A poem is “a possible utterance, what the poet might say” (ibid., p. 16). Here a perceptive theorist discerns the intrinsic link between literature and pure possibility.
flourish. As Geoffrey Hartman writes, “[literary] art narrates that middle region and charts it like a purgatory... The excluded middle is a tragedy also for the imagination.”

Imagining is intrinsically intermediary, but it operates in a *via media* whose boundaries are marked out by recurrent formal patterns. Like Plato’s Receptacle, the indeterminacy of imaginal space demands the ordering element of form. Although literary form is not ideal in the Platonic sense, it plays an ordering role by virtue of appearing and continually reappearing (whether overtly or covertly) within the work.

IV

Despite the affinities between literature and the daydream to which we have just pointed, the experience of the literary work involves one factor which is not normally of central significance in daydreaming: the word or verbal sign. Although verbal language is sometimes a feature of ordinary reveries, it rarely assumes a truly constitutive role there; if it appears at all, it tends to be mere verbiage, an indifferent and mute cluster of nonsignifying words. But in literature, as in everyday discourse, words function actively as signs, and their being as signs precedes and makes possible their crystallization into images. Furthermore, unlike the components of strictly imagined content, words are internally complex. A visualized object or event is curiously depthless and frontal, and possesses no hidden structure: it is as it appears and is *only* as it appears. In contradistinction to this, each word, phrase, and sentential unit in literature is at least doubly articulated, in accordance with the co-essential (but arbitrarily conjoined) orders of the signifier and the signified. Complicating the situation still further is the fact that signifier and signified are not related to each other as physical to psychical, sensory to intellective. As Derrida has argued, the signifier is not reducible to the strictly physical face of the

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Edward Casey

sign, that is, to the sign as actually printed or recorded. (Printing and recording are empirical bearers in the sense discussed above; they allow the sign to persist in time and/or space and thus to be capable of continual reinterpretation.) Rather, the signifier is phenomenal in character; it is the sign taken rigorously in its being-seen or in its being-heard, that is, as a sheer appearing from which the brute presence of the empirically real has been excluded. In the phenomenon of verbal signification, physis is transmuted into the phainomenon of form, into form-as-phenomenon.16

It follows that in the experience of literature physically presented signs are subjected to a spontaneous epoché or "reduction" which renders them phenomenal, and no longer merely empirical, in their presence to the reader. But literary experience does not cease at this point—if it did, language would be confined to the same supine and nonsignifying role which it usually plays in day-dreaming. The reduced, phenomenal surface of the literary work refers the reader, implicitly or explicitly, to meanings that super-intend this very surface and structure it. The signified, being of the order of meaning, is not inherently linguistic; it may also be aimed at by means of non-verbal signifiers. Nevertheless, the signified dimension of the work is not radically other than its reduced verbal texture. Not only may the signified itself function as a signifier, but its non-physical and non-real status is experientially continuous with the reduced verbal signifier. In language, both signifier and signified are phenomenal; they are pure appearances. The meaning that is "meant" in the production and apprehension of verbal signs is not a separately existing and separately grasped meaning, but a signification immanent in the textual surface itself. In short, the signified rejoins the signifier in the reduced texture of the text. And if this is so, it is misleading to oppose the phonemic and/or graphemic stratum to the morphemic or semantic stratum of the literary work. This work is not strung out between the order of the signifier and the order of the signified. The two orders, though


259
distinguishable in linguistic and semiological theory and in literary-critical analysis, are experientially intertwined, commingling on the basis of a common phenomenality of form.

But now we must turn to another, still more problematic com-mixture: that between words and images, language and imagination. The world of the literary work is supported and sustained by words, both as empirical and as phenomenal entities. Yet this world is an imaginal world, a world illumined by the incandescence of images. How can two such disparate elements as words and images cohabit so successfully in literary experience?

Let us consider for a moment Husserl's early typology of mental acts, in which three kinds of psychic activity are to be distinguished:

(a) "sensation": sensory perception as presentation of directly given and full-bodied objects and events;
(b) memory and anticipation: the two primary forms of "positing" (setzende) presentification, in which presentation gives way to representation;
(c) imagining and sign-activity: the two main modes of "non-positing" presentification. 17

If we focus on level (c), we see that for Husserl image and sign (of which latter the word or verbal sign is the most important variety) are intimately allied. As co-ordinate species of the same genus, they are differentiated primarily in terms of their respective vehicles: whereas signs normally have material vehicles (e.g., printed or spoken words), images (i.e., mental images) are conveyed non-materially, purely psychically. 18 Despite this difference, image and

17 This schema is compiled from Husserl's remarks in Zur Phänomenologie des Inneren Zeitbewussteins, ed. R. Boehm (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1966), sec. 17 and various appendices to this work. Material from Ideen I (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1950), secs. 99-101 and 111, has also been incorporated. It should be noted that Husserl sometimes includes "picturing" (i.e., forming a likeness or portrait) as a third mode of non-positing presentification.

18 On the question of proper vehicles, see Husserl's distinction between "sensation" and "phantasm" in Zur Phänomenologie des Inneren Zeitbewussteins, Appendix II, pp. 101-103, and in Ideen I, sec. 112. Cf. also Sartre's discussion of the different "analoga" possessed by various members of the "image family" in L'Imaginaire, Part I, chapter two. But it must be remarked that even this distinction is not absolute: thoughts, which are non-material, act as signs; and precisely in art images are conveyed by material vehicles.
Edward Casey

sign share two important common characteristics: (1) they have the same *non-positing* character; (2) they are both types of *presentification*. We shall consider these two characteristics separately in an effort to show that each is essentially linked to repetition.

(1) An act is "non-positing" when it does not posit or presume the existence of its content. It does not deny its existence either; it is expressively *neutral* in this regard. 19 This existential neutrality is most perfectly embodied in imaginative experience. For as non-positing in character, imagining exhibits the following two capacities. First of all, the neutral stance of imagination enables it to be reiterated indefinitely, since the constraints imposed by the positing of existence are no longer operative. Whereas we cannot have perceptions of perceptions, we can easily generate images of images, images of images of images, and so on *ad infinitum*. Thus *repetition is built into the very structure of the non-positing image*. Indeed, imagination's extraordinary reiterative powers establish it as the repetitive mental act *par excellence*, and in this capacity it forms a paradigm for the significantly less extensive reiterations of which other types of presentification are capable (e.g., memories of memories, portraits of portraits, signs of signs, etc.). 20

Secondly, imagination as non-positing is uniquely capable of joining forces with other acts, positing or not. This indicates that imagining, far from having to be an isolated and isolating act (as Sartre and the surrealists supposed), can form part of quite complex psychic experiences. A pertinent example of such an experience is given by Husserl himself in the form of the following thought-experiment. Suppose yourself remembering your last visit to a certain art museum. Contained within this single act of recollection, and yet distinct from memory proper, there may also be present: free images (by which gaps in memory are filled in), reiterated images (i.e., paintings of paintings), and signs (e.g., titles

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19 Such a neutral attitude is not to be confused with what Husserl calls the "neutrality-modification." The latter is a special procedure for suspending the existence-positing propensities of acts such as sensory perception and memory. It is strictly non-reiterable. Cf. *Ideen I*, sec. 109-112.

20 On the question of reiteration, see *Ideen I*, sec. 112: "The Imaginal Modification can be Reiterated but not the Neutrality-Modification."
affixed to the recollected paintings). Just such a combination of diverse elements may also be present in literary works, which typically bring together memories, images, and signs—above all, the latter two factors. In fact, the co-presence of image and word in literature represents only a particularly subtle and intricate instance of the more general possibility of conjoining imagination with other mental acts, especially other presentifying acts.

(2) But what then is "presentification"? It is significant that Husserl employs two different terms for this phenomenon: Vergegenwärtigung and Re-Präsentation. Such lexical ambiguity suggests that there are two distinguishable sorts of activity at stake here. On the one hand, in the absence of strictly sensory presentation, there is presentification proper, i.e. making present to the mind. As Husserl himself observes, whereas sensory perception "places something under our eyes as itself in person ... presentification [Vergegenwärtigung] does not place an object in person before our eyes." Rather, it places a presence before our minds. This presence may be remembered, imagined, depicted, or signified; but in every case it is a matter of something that, instead of presenting itself in external perception, has to be made present to mind by the activity of mind itself. On the other hand, there is presentification qua re-presentation [Re-Präsentation]. This notion arises from the fact that the psychic presence which is realized in presentification proper is nonsensory and thus of secondary status in Husserl's epistemological hierarchy. Failing to attain a strictly sensory presence through direct contact with the perceived world, presentifying acts are condemned to repeating or re-presenting what was (or what might have been) originally present to the senses. It does not matter that the resulting re-presentation, being intuitive and nonsensory, is highly attenuated, lacking the specificity and situatedness of

23 Ibid., sec. 17; italics are Husserl's. Cf. also the statement from sec. 19: "not to give in person is precisely the essence of imagination."
Edward Casey

sensation. What counts is that some form of presence is proffered in supra-sensational mental acts—a presence which is at once the mind’s work and a representative or analogue of concrete sensory givenness.

This peculiar form of presence, presentificational but not presentational, is the presence of form. In the absence of sensation, the only possible presence is formal in nature. Thus Husserl writes revealingly that “in presentification we experience the sound, or rather the form of the sound…”24 What is presentified in character, then, is not sensory content but form—a form which is phenomenal and not ideal. And since presentified form is phenomenal, the presence which it bestows is not only indefinitely repeatable but such as to demand repetition. The presentified presence of form must be re-presented to the mind, by the mind, over and over again if such presence is to gain consistency and identity and thus to triumph over the transiency of its phenomenal status. In such representative activity, repetition becomes indispensable as the only means of capturing and consolidating a phantom presence. On this basis, repeating may finally become a value in itself, comparable to (and part of) the perfect poem in Stevens’ conception:

A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:
One of the vast repetitions final in
Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round
And round and round, the merely going round
Until merely going round is a final good… 25

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Thus we have come full cycle. If the content of a presentifying act such as memory or imagination is phenomenal-formal and not sensory-material in nature, presentification will always be representative or repetitive in its action. Since such content is contingent and inconstant—its phenomenal status entails its strict dependence upon the mind’s attention—it is something which must

24 Ibid., sec. 19; my italics.
be continually returned to, retrieved, repeated. Only substantive sensory presence can satisfy or “fulfill” psychic intentions completely and non-elusively. It is in sensory perception alone that we are able to achieve a coincidence between what is given and what is meant—a genuine sensory plenitude (“Fülle” says Husserl)—which does not leave us with unsatisfied, still unsatiated intentions. In all presentifying acts, in contrast, there exists an uneliminable lack of complete sensory fulfillment. Such chronic non-fulfillment calls for repeated re-presentation if a more concrete content, a more adequate presence, is to be attained.

A longing for the plenitude and stability of sensory presence, so evident in experiences of nostalgic recollection, is all the more striking in non-positing types of presentification. For in these latter we do not possess either the memory of former satisfaction—a memory which can achieve at least a momentary perceptual identity with the content of the original experience—or the anticipation of future satisfaction. Instead, we have only the free projection, whether by means of images or signs, of forms which are unanchored in previous perceptions and which do not portend future fulfillment. This is precisely the situation in literary experience, where memory normally plays a marginal role and where images and verbal signs combine in the search for a plenitudinous presence, a presence of what is real:

We keep coming back and coming back
To the real.../We seek
The poem of pure reality, untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object
At the exactest point at which it is itself...27

But the search here described by Stevens is in vain. The poem is not “part of the res itself.” It is incapable of giving us the real

27 Wallace Stevens, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” in op. cit., p. 471. The following citations from Stevens are all from the same poem with the exception of the line “as if the central poem became the world,” which comes from “A Primitive like an Orb.”
thing in its sensory plenitude or even an adequate analogue of it. Contrary to Stevens' contention, it is not "as if the central poem became the world." The world of the work cannot become, or even stand proxy for, the world, the world of perception and action. External reality, or what Heidegger calls "the worldhood of the world," forever eludes the tenterhooks of literary works, including those that we explicitly label "realist." The world of the work remains irrevocably imaginal in status. As such, it does not reproduce realities, but projects and actively re-creates possibilities. Stevens should be cited against himself: "Reality is the beginning not the end." Neither the actual sensuousness of the work's aesthetic surface nor the quasi-sensuousness of its imaginal world can replace or replicate the direct vibrancy of lived presence. The only presence attainable in the work is the presence of form; and this presence is phenomenal, not plentitudinous, in character.

The phenomenality of form determines the experiential limits of literary experience, an experience in which recovery of, and coincidence with, the plenum of the real evades us as surely as it does in daydream and reverie. The mysterium coniunctionis within literature of image and word, i.e. of two non-positing modes of presentification, underscores the futility of regarding the literary work as a presentation which can convey sensory fulfillment. The futility is only heightened by the fact, underlined earlier, that the forms found in literature—forms which constitute the world of the work—are more internally complex than those which structure ordinary reverie. For the complexity of literary form serves more to alienate us from the real than to help us approximate to it.

The complex formal character of the literary work and its world means that work and world both depend upon the presence of repetitive elements. In literature, as elsewhere, repetition is form-giving: it "infallibly yields a sense of form." 28 Yet however effective various repetitive devices may be in a given case (e.g., subtly

recurrent rhythmic patterns, parallelisms of subplots, etc.) and even if these devices are capable of inducing corresponding acts of imaginal-verbal repetition in the mind of the reader, they nonetheless fail to attain the *Fülle* of perceived presence. For repetition in literature—whether regarded as belonging to the objective structure of the work, as inherent in the reader’s acts of apprehension, or (most adequately) as ingredient in both at once—cannot claim to be an exact re-production of the perceptually real. Literary repetition is, rather, an imaginative poetizing of essentially unrealized, un-perceived possibilities: pure possibilities which cannot proffer presence in the phenomenologically paradigmatic form of sensuously specific being.

In the absence of such presence, we are left with what Valéry calls “reciprocal correspondence, resumption, or indefinite prolongation”—in other words, with an unending cycle of repetitions which can never achieve full perceptual presence. “What is most characteristic,” says Valéry in discussing the nature of aesthetic experience in general, “is the need to see again, to hear again, to experience indefinitely... The music lover cries ‘encore’ or hums the tune that has delighted him. The child wants the story repeated: ‘Tell it over again...’” 29

Literature in particular is the kind of thing that must be told over and over again because no single hearing or reading enables us to reach a directly given and stably situated presence. Nor does any finite number of hearings or readings. What Derrida states as

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29 Both quotations are from Paul Valéry, “The Idea of Art,” pp. 28-29; the italics are mine. Compare Freud’s statement in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: “if a child has been told a nice story, he will insist on hearing it over and over again rather than a new one; and he will remorselessly stipulate that the repetition shall be an identical one” (trans. J. Strachey in the Standard Edition, Vol. XVIII, p. 35). Whether repetition is here adequately conceived as the sheer reiteration of the selfsame—or whether, as Deleuze asserts, genuine repetition is inseparable from difference and variegation (cf. *Différence et Rétention*, pp. 36-38)—is a question which cannot be settled within the narrow scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that the reciprocal relevance of imagination and repetition to which attention has been drawn suggests that repetition must be more than the reinstatement of the same. Instead, it traces out the boundaries of an imaginative activity that is inherently diversifying while at the same time being ingredient in this activity itself in the form of re-presentation.
Edward Casey

a general philosophical thesis is in this regard more apt as a description of literature itself: “presence, in order to be presence and presence-to-self, has always already assumed the form of representation, [thus] has always already been contaminated.” ³⁰ To assume the form of representation is to require repetition-in-imagination, for we have seen that such form is phenomenal and calls for repeated re-presentation through successive acts of imagining. Yet imaginative re-presentation in literature, though essential to the constitution of the world of the work, is ultimately of no avail. No matter how diligent or ingenious the reader’s efforts at re-creation in imagination may be, they will never deliver to him an uncontaminated, unrepresented presence devoid of the “spots of indeterminacy” that afflict all literary works.³¹ In place of determinate and unmediated presence, there is only the repetitive cycle of images and verbal signs that shape the literary work in its fragile formal being.

Literary experience, then, is the re-presentation of phenomenally presented forms—of forms whose recurrence in the literary text marks off the imaginal limits of the work’s world. These limits, projected but not perceived, disallow the attainment of strict sensory presence, a presence of which the reader of literature is irremediably deprived. What the reader does experience is an object which arises from the conjoint activity of imagination as formalizing re-presentation and of repetition as active re-creation. This object—the literary work as experienced—represents a momentary merging of intending and intended, subject and world. But the work’s peculiar presence is neither insistent nor lasting; unlike perceived presence, it does not thrust itself upon us and it cannot endure on its own. To remain the basis and focus of literary experience, the literary work must be continually revived: re-imagined by means of repetition both within the work and within the mind.

³¹ On “spots of indeterminacy” as intrinsic to the literary work, see Roman Ingarden, The Literary Work of Art, trans. G. G. Grabowicz (Evans- ton: Northwestern University Press, 1973), sec. 38. These Unbestimmtheitsstellen give to the work its characteristic “opalescent” quality.