Book note on Madeleine Frederic, La repetition: Etude linguistique et rhetorique

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Review
Reviewed Work(s):
   La répétition: Étude linguistique et rhétorique
   by Madeleine Frédéric
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for detailed linguistic analyses or argumentation. [KAREN ANN HUNOLD, Berkeley.]


This dissertation from the Free University of Brussels is a detailed analysis of poetic figures of speech involving repetition. Repetition, for F, consists of ‘returns’ or ‘reappearances’ which are not the result of any linguistic constraint, but rather the result of an author’s choice: what returns or reappears can be a formal element or a semantic one (231).

The first part of the book is a history of figures of repetition. F begins by pointing out that the device was highly valued in Western literary discourse until the 19th century, when it came to be seen as too artificial (however, it is used by many 20th century authors). F provides an overview of the ways in which repetitive schemes and tropes have been classified by authors from Quintilian onward. Ch. 4 is a list of 43 classical figures of repetition (paronomasia, homeoteleuton, assonance, pleonasm etc.), with examples from Greek, Latin, and French.

In the second part, F updates the classical treatment of repetition. In the first chapter here, she discusses various phenomena that look like repetition—redundancy in morphosyntactic marking; anaphora; topic-frontings; the pathological repetition of echolalia, perseveration, and stuttering; and unconscious repetitions of various kinds, such as those that fill processing gaps and unintentional semantic redundancies like *preview in advance*—to decide which are really figures. In her final chapter, F lists figures of repetition, classified according to the amount of conscious choice on an author’s part, conscious occurrences are then subclassified according to whether what is repeated is formal, semantic, or both. Each figure discussed is exemplified with extracts from literary works, mainly contemporary poetry in French.

F seems to take a fairly traditional view of literature as consisting of figured uses of language. She points out (83) that classical authors had no real theory of style or of figures of speech; but her own treatment, while more detailed and focused, is no more theoretical than earlier ones. Beyond saying that repetition adds texture and depth to a literary work, F says little about how it works or why it is so pervasive in all genres of discourse. Her work, which is primarily descriptive, is meticulous and easy to follow. This volume will be of interest to students of the history of literary stylistics, and is a useful reference tool for anyone interested in repetition. [BARBARA JOHNSTONE, Georgetown University.]


G, in this audacious and thoroughgoing reassessment, seeks to erase what she alleges to have been two millennia of damaging intellectual obfuscation on the subject of metaphor. Modern theoreticians from Chomsky and Ryle to Richards and Ricoeur have, she claims, accepted as gospel an Aristotelian definition of metaphor which ‘does not [even] match [Aristotle’s] usual acuity of insight and clarity of approach’ (xi, 216). As a consequence, they have repeatedly evaded their responsibility to return to first principles, concentrating instead on elaborating a system whose very basis remains as flawed today as when Aristotle first advanced it. For that system—deviationist, lexical, acontextual and thus ‘use-less’ (25)—G proposes to substitute a new one: structural and functionally motivated.

The book contains four sections, highly diverse in both purpose and style. Part I presents, in relatively straightforward terms, G’s argument for rejecting the accepted account of metaphor. The fundamental problem, she suggests, arises from critics’ willingness to view language as ‘literal’ when it acts in such a way as to seem to reflect ‘natural’ categories in the real world (and only then). In actual fact, she points out, human beings converse by acceding to a complex variety of conventions established by previous users of their language—conventions that are without exception ‘arbitrary’, (19) intra-linguistic, synchronic (25) and indeed language-particular: ‘What language “says” ... and what “is” or exists in empirical reality are two different “things”’ (219). To insist that metaphor involve some kind of ‘proxy-tenet substitution’ (3) thus implicates the critic in a fatal confusion.