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THE ORGAN OF REPETITION

A consideration of 'learning by heart' and its contribution to thought and change

This paper considers the practice of learning-by-heart and argues for its relevance to learning, to thought (as defined by Gilles Deleuze) and as a way of turning towards the 'new' or 'the future', via the operation of repetition. It considers two modes in which rote learning can be productive and provocative—firstly, when the content itself is something worth retaining, and secondly, when the actual process of the learning itself and then the repeating align themselves with the criteria of 'practice', as framed by the author here. In the face of rote learning's reputation as an out-moded pedagogical tool, the paper argues that it inhabits a paradoxical and productive site, whereby what begins as a repetition of the same, can open towards pure repetition (as Deleuze frames this notion), and facilitate inventiveness and a courting of the new. In this way, poetry, and the learning of it by rote, constitute a unique constellation, disputing the platitude that learning is 'only discovering what one already knew' and instead proposing that learning is closer to an awesome ordeal, one that leads to concepts and collisions that did not exist before and cannot be predicted in advance.

Keywords: practice – poetry – learning by heart – Deleuze – repetition – eternal return – habit – inventiveness

... a 'comprehensive representation' of the cosmos must envelop an expression or event which cannot itself be represented, it is not so much a question of the Stoic 'sage' understanding the causal order through the total conjunction of its effects, as it is of *giving her body to the ongoing determination of the event in which she participates.*

—Gilles Deleuze, *The logic of sense* (Bowden 2011: 44)

Introduction

In this paper, I wish to consider the seemingly old-fashioned practice of learning things by heart. The inquiry exceeds the boundaries of poetry *per se*, insofar as it's possible to learn many things 'by heart'—recipes, quotes from literary criticism, scenes from sit-coms, shopping lists and so on. However, given that a *not* insignificant amount of poetry's history has included works that have either been primarily orally transmitted (and therefore memorised), or—due to prosody's workings—feasibly committed to memory, one can at least say with confidence that *some* poetry comes in a shape that invites one to learn it, or to attempt to learn it, 'off by heart'.

My initial argument, then, which involves extending this logic, is that a certain kind of repetitive encounter

with the poetic artefact might act as a provocation to thought, as Deleuze frames this category in his 1968 work *Difference and repetition* (2004a). This has to do with repetition's role in how difference gets *in*—'pure difference' as Deleuze might term it. To do this, I will refer to his critique of, what he terms, the 'dogmatic image of thought' (see 2004a). I want to claim that an encounter with poetry through learning by heart may contribute to an expanded capacity to think. I will then approach the notion of repetition-for-itself, and outline ways in which Deleuze's use of this concept can be turned towards understanding a certain radicalness in repetition that can result in change, or in a future we can't know. Throughout I will take up certain inflections of the practice of learning poetry by heart, to illustrate my claims.

Learning by Heart

An interesting paradox is worth pointing out. It may be that forcing someone to repeat and learn by rote is the best way of setting down signs for a more intense learning.

—Gilles Deleuze's *difference and repetition* (Williams 2013: 21)

Why this preoccupation with rote learning, to use its less flattering name? It would seem that for several or more decades now, learning-by-heart, in numerous pedagogical contexts (except perhaps theatre or performance studies and medicine) has fallen away and been deemed obsolete—an embarrassing relic of oppressive and ostensibly ineffectual approaches to teaching and learning. (Just prior to Williams' admission—quoted above—that perhaps there is something paradoxical to be acknowledged in questions of learning, he outlines Deleuze's own doubts concerning rote learning's role, emphasising the contentious nature of this topic.) Rote learning, I would argue, places neither the teacher nor the student at the centre of the activity, instead the *object* is primary—the learner being required to narrow their focus, and to enter an intensive and demanding relationship with the artefact itself.

Artefact. Relationship. There are, hence, two limbs to my argument concerning 'learning by heart'. The first speaks to cases where the content itself is relevant, and where there is a perceived benefit in the retaining of *that* particular content. The second emphasises what the relationship with that content sets into play. This is the aspect of this learning mode that involves a certain *mechanism*, one that may operate to some extent regardless of the material or form. Ideally, both aspects feature, and are entangled in one another.

Content as Relevant

1a) In instances where the content itself is important/relevant but still beyond the learner's frame of understanding, rote learning allows for an internalising of the content (and implicitly its conceptual intensities) prior to familiar understanding;

1b) That, as a result of this, something specific to rote learning or 'learning by heart' is its capacity to induce the particular kind of shock that Deleuze claims is required for 'thought' (as he defines it) to occur.

Mechanism/Relationship as Relevant

2a) That, irrespective of memorised content, it is specifically the 'repetitive' nature of 'learning by heart' that situates it as an example of *practive*, one which operates like a kind of laboratory for the new, wherein the habits that constrain our lives (as opposed to the habits that sustain them) might be unsettled, and where we might court radical contingency or what I would align with Deleuze's notion of 'difference-in-itself';

2b) And, finally, that as well as its relevance to ‘thought’, ‘learning’ and so on, ‘learning by heart’ can assist us in a thinking of *practice proper*, which, by providing an arbitrary and strict structure to that which evades or operates beyond existing structures, codes or systems, serves to open a passage between what there (now) is and the future.

Encounters, deferred and multiple

Argument 1(a).

For a number of years, I had noted rote learning’s fall into obscurity, into quaint inappropriateness—no longer even an enemy to learning, since not to be taken seriously in pedagogy at all. I remained, however, curious about it more broadly. On the one hand, I had lived through countless baffling car journeys with my own father who, having left school at 15, would at random points, somewhere between Gundagai and Sydney, launch into unprovoked recitals of Wordsworth’s ‘Daffodils’. *I wandered lonely as a cloud*, delivered with an irreverent plum-in-the-mouth accent, was the mantra of the long-distance road trip of my childhood. Not only ‘Daffodils’, but also ‘The Highway Man’ by Alfred Noyes—at least the first eight stanzas of it—featured in these unexpected outbursts, and was a slightly racier accompaniment to a pre-Christmas dash along the Hume. Now— my father, having pursued the unrelated professions of salesman, primary producer, and general entrepreneur, had still absorbed these poems thoroughly enough before the age of 15, to be able to recite them almost faultlessly *and playfully* over 35 years later. Even if he needed to ‘ham them up’ somewhat, he must—I assumed—have valued something about knowing them, or gleaned some kind of pleasure from the act of reciting them over. We were, indeed, subjected to this pleasure of his.

We can note here already a feature peculiar to rote-learned artefacts or excerpts, namely that they are very portable. One carries the memorised object ‘close to oneself’ (so to speak), and the object, as a result, is instantly accessible (even with both hands on the wheel of a 4WD). In this way, rote learning could be considered an intrinsic technology. Definitely not ‘natural’, it is also not a device, as such. It could be deemed a technological modification ‘contained’ within the skin’s envelope, but more accurately still, it is perhaps a choreography integrated into what the body *does*. More in this vein shortly.

Now, a further prompt to my considering more rigorously this way of interacting with texts, and with poetry as the exemplary text of rote learning, came in the context of studying yoga. Part of the curriculum involved engaging with the foundational texts of the tradition—certain parts of the *Upanishads*, some sections of the *Gita*, but on this particular occasion, an extended practice of chanting the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali. In the course of class discussion, the teacher—Orit Sen Gupta—mentioned, in passing, the attitude of the early practitioners to oral learning. She explained that they assumed that the novice would not be able to appreciate or recognise the layers of meaning or the significance of the content of these wisdom texts; they were novices and apprentices, after all! On account of this inability, they were required to learn the sequences of aphorisms by rote, by dint of repetition (that is, via bodily memory of sounds and the actions or doings of utterance rather than through an application of so-called understanding). Just like song lyrics, I thought — one of the ubiquitous and unacknowledged forms in which rote learning persists in our quotidian lives. My teacher also explained that the aphorisms, once ‘implanted’, worked somewhat like seeds, germinating much later and in other circumstances. If we extend the logic of this notion, what also emerges is the likelihood that the consequences of this germination will also *not* be predictable, and certainly not teleological. Where, then, rote learning might be cursorily perceived as the handmaiden of conventional authoritarian relationships, and thereby somehow associated with control over the learner, I would contend that this aspect of delayed germination might also operate subversively, with

the learner being both subject to the text's (or teacher's) authority at one register, while at the same time on another register multiplying, dispersing and thereby disrupting the received logics and their trajectories.

So, to summarise: content before insight; or an intimate experience of something without claim either to have already pierced its system or secrets, or to have totalised in advance its consequences and chains of meaning. In other words, 'learning' as unpredictable *encounter* with the art object—the latter as 'interlocutor' with its own arguable degree of autonomy.

If we allow this argument some weight, then it unsettles, or rather prises open and rearranges the seductive notion which goes something like: *one is never taught anything, rather one only comes to recognise what one understood all along*. It is an old, cosy and slightly comforting approach to learning. It arguably finds one of its origins in Plato's *Meno* (2005), in which, with the help of a slave, the character of Socrates demonstrates to Meno that 'learning' is really a matter of remembering (see 2005: 102-112). The former does this by asking a series of pointed and strategically ordered questions that lead the slave to understand how one would double the area of a square. Socrates' argument, of course, seems very convincing—the slave gets it right without having had any training in geometry—and learning appears to Meno, and the reader, to be quite clearly a matter of remembering. What isn't articulated in the dialogue is that learning is also a matter of method and less often a matter of content. This elides the fact of Socrates' having stepped the slave painstakingly through the series of questions. As we know, methodology is often far more crucial than content in terms of the valuable things one would 'learn' in a life. Invention, too, if Derrida's criteria of it are right (see Derrida 1987 generally & Pont 2012: 99) involves 'finding there for the first time', and its difficult nature is that the invented 'thing' or 'technique' retrospectively appears to have been there all along, despite the necessity of 'finding' it for the first time. This implies that invention (as a way of framing or perceiving newly what is materially available in the world) is that which allows the *articulation* of technique, of method, and that this 'way' through did not exist prior to the moment of 'finding'.

Learning-as-remembering is opposed, then, to learning framed as a contingent and often uncomfortable ordeal. This might support the notion, then, that certain learnings, along with thought as Deleuze frames it, cannot be glibly assumed nor be forced to serve an agenda in advance.

This approach—*never taught anything, only recognising what one knew all along*—involves a double-barrelled assertion. The first part plausibly questions certain attitudes to 'taughtness'—in other words, the worrying idea that the learner changes (becomes 'taught') as a result of absorbing content 'owned' and then delivered by the person in the role of teacher. But it is the platitude's coupling with its second 'barrel' (or iterations thereof) that is more troubling and one with which I wish to take issue. This sentiment, moreover, dovetails most interestingly with certain of Deleuze's statements regarding thought and its philosophical lineage.

*One only comes to **recognise** what one understood all along.*

This sentiment informing this kind of notion of learning-as-recovery betrays its investments in a nostalgic image of learning and thought.

To quote Deleuze here:

The form of recognition has never sanctioned anything but the recognisable and the recognised; form will never inspire anything but conformities. (2004a: 170)

My argument is that the argument against ‘learning by heart’—which simplistically believes itself to offer in its stead a fresh, and freeing approach to pedagogy—falls more insidiously into the trap of a nostalgic longing for origins. It wants to claim (on the sly) that understanding is already *and even originally* there in the learner, and teaching simply involves waking that up. Learning as ‘waking up existing understanding’ relies for its coherence on a very explicit, but masked, assumption—namely that thought operates on the basis of recognition. It is at this point that I can turn to the Deleuze of *Difference and repetition*.

In his work, from 1968, Deleuze mounts a solid critique of what he terms the dogmatic or moral image of thought (2004a: 167). It might be read not as a critique of *what* we think, but rather of what we think thinking *is*. This dogmatic image of thought informs a way of understanding thinking that has saturated philosophy since its beginnings, and involves intrinsic assumptions or pre-philosophical givens. Deleuze follows the lineage of this *doxa* from Plato (where its reign is not yet absolute), through Aristotle (where it becomes entrenched), and onwards through the history of philosophy, noting along the way certain instances of resistance or complication, for example, in Leibniz and Maimon.¹ Deleuze’s contention involves identifying a number of operating elements in the *doxa*, which due to length constraints I will only touch upon briefly. The first one is the assumption of ‘good will on the part of the thinker and an upright nature on the part of thought’ (2004a: 166), which Deleuze refutes. He writes, making playful use of the notion of the ‘everybody knows’ approach to intrinsic assumptions:

‘Everybody’ knows very well that in fact men think rarely, and more often under the impulse of a shock than in the excitement of a taste for thinking. (2004a: 168)

A further element of this dogmatic image of thought that this quote refutes is a subjective principle of the coordinated operation of the faculties, or put more simply, *common sense*. This assumes that everybody’s faculties (not just mine) already recognise the apple and do so harmoniously. It is this aspect of the dogmatic image of thought that presses most clearly upon my enquiry here, since it rests upon an assumption of recognition at the heart of what it means to think.

To frame thinking as good and upright alongside thought-as-recognition (which according to Deleuze is the dominant way that thought has been approached in the history of philosophy) does something very interesting *to* thought. Its consequence is that thought can never reach beyond itself; it can never be something that encounters the truly problematic and produces the new as a result of this encounter. Deleuze has this ominous comment to make:

Recognition is a sign of the celebration of monstrous nuptials, in which thought ‘rediscovers’ the State, rediscovers ‘the Church’ and rediscovers all the current values that it subtly presented in the pure form of an eternally blessed unspecified eternal object. (2004a: 172)

To frame thinking primarily as recognition is to fetter and reduce thought to calculation, to embroil it in manoeuvres of aligning existing terms with other existing terms; or into tight constellations of equivalence, analogy or contradiction.

Let’s return to my anecdotal preamble about yogis learning things by rote for oral transmission, and my teacher’s explanation that the ancients assumed that students, by definition, were considered not equipped to understand the ramifications of the texts they were consuming. Let’s also imagine my father as a cheeky, recalcitrant adolescent, thoroughly uninterested in yellow flowers, and fidgety in the face of memorising

rhymes about enduring romantic love. He could neither have appreciated nor predicted the future concoctions that might result from his having memorised these poetic works (and neither could his teachers). To have recognised *at that time* their potential relevance or capacity to unsettle would probably have been an indication of their impotence and non-volatility.

Difficult Pleasures

Argument 1(b)

I suspect that in this current historical moment, dominated—as Alain Badiou might term it—by a kind of ‘democratic materialism’ (2009: 1) there is a squeamishness around any suggestion that ‘students’ are those who *don’t know how*, or that learning might involve a thinking that is neither a pre-existent given, nor something we all do as a matter of course. Deleuze makes clear that he believes thinking is rare and results from shock. He states:

Do not count upon thought to ensure the relative necessity of what it thinks. Rather, count upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces thought to raise up and educate the absolute necessity of an act of thought or a passion to think. (2004a: 176)

We get the problems or the encounters that our lives present to us. We get our very own collisions with obstacles that are truly obstacles in the world. We do not think these up as exercises in pondering. They happen *to us*—we are their dative objects and not the agents of their instantiation. (But it is also in the way we affirm our relation to such happenings—our ‘lot’—that ‘agency’ is reframed. See below).

I would further claim, extending this logic, that learning or thinking involves being confronted with content, but also with practices and ‘ways’, that rather than appealing to us, are deeply problematic, must seem unfathomable, may well appear irrelevant (from the standpoint of the recognisable), and quite frankly *irritate or bother* us—in the same way that difficult theory irritates, untangling certain registers of English bothers us, or having awkward conversations might repel us—a deep discomfort, sometimes felt as ‘boredom’, in the face of the known no longer holding sway.

This was what struck me when it was explained why we were approaching the sutra study by rote. I saw that I needed to ingest the pure content (Devanagari terms as sound; chains of seemingly dry and random assertions). I would learn without understanding, and that memorised content would later serve as a kind of matter that could be set on a collision course with happenings, problems, obstacles in my life, sparked and erupting out of my psychic system at haphazard moments, to be recast, disputed or affirmed.

In the teaching of first year creative writing tutorials, I have been setting a recital for each student throughout the trimester. They are given a poem randomly, and told they must learn it off by heart, in order to recite it on a given date. I have offered no room for negotiation. They have all complied; some shoddily, others with a great deal of flair. I am running an experiment, the results of which I will not be around to witness, or to assess, since they will be necessarily deferred into an unmapped future moment. Perhaps their children will be there to assess the outcomes. On car trips, while hiking, perhaps spontaneously in the middle of family gatherings, my ex-students might pronounce a stanza of Dylan Thomas, of Carroll, of Elizabeth Bishop, of Amichai, of Williams, of Shakespeare, of Plath. I say to them that poems can be there in the most stretched and fraught moments—returning and immediately accessible when the memory throws them up and out, and suddenly coupling with circumstance to produce an understanding whose ingredients had to have been incubating for a long time but whose offspring is

unforeseeable, perhaps divine or monstrous. Otherwise unthinkable—not pre-given and not already theirs—this opening onto thought constitutes rather a violent collision between art and life, perhaps art and the real, in order to appear in response to a true problem, one whose structure precludes any existing solution, but one with which, through poetry, we may be able to learn to live in innovative, robust ways.

In summary, my arguments above pertain to instances of ‘learning by heart’ where content is foregrounded. In what follows, I will address the second limb of my series of arguments, namely the role of ‘learning by heart’ not primarily in the service of an encounter with content, but rather functioning both as an example of practice, *as well as* a model for, and on the way to a formalisation of, practice proper.

Organs of Repetition

Argument 2(a)

At the start of Deleuze’s *Difference and repetition*, there is the wondrous and slightly enigmatic statement, one that foretells the flavour of a driving preoccupation of the work:

The head is the organ of exchange, but the heart is the amorous organ of repetition. (It is true that repetition also concerns the head, but precisely because it is its terror or paradox). (2004a: 2)

Is it that the head shies away from the sheer force of repetition? And, is the heart, as a different kind of organ, better suited to put that power into play? These are poetic speculations. Let us stick, for now, with arguments.

To read along with Deleuze, it would seem that ‘repetition’, as a terror or paradox, has the potential to baffle or frighten, perhaps due to its non-relation to certain structural coercions or exigencies of known systems. In *The Logic of Sense* from 1969, however, which itself consists famously of 34 paradoxes, Deleuze explains that paradox is better understood to be the genesis of contradiction, not a species of it. We read the following:

The force of paradoxes is that they are *not contradictory*; they rather allow us to be present at the genesis of the contradiction. The principle of contradiction is applicable to the real and the possible, but not to the impossible from which it derives, that is, to paradoxes, or rather, to what paradoxes represent. (2004b: 84, emphasis added)

If this paragraph prompts anything, it might be wariness in the face of the movement of contradictions—gruelling, circling viciously, a numbing kind of *and/or* roundabout. In other words, the way out or forward might not be via the contradiction. In this paper, so far, I have been trying to destabilise the ‘common sense’ notion which would deem learning through repetition or ‘by heart’ as a method that necessarily precludes the new. In a way, I am trying to eschew mobilising the assumed contradiction or opposition that I perceive to have settled in a pocket of the popular imaginary between rote learning and change or newness. If it is not clear so far, my claim here is that ‘learning by heart’ *does* indeed terrify us (see above quotation) because its very mechanisms promise *and* threaten to usher in the new, or ‘difference’—in a manner we cannot predict or know in advance. It might seem counter-intuitive, to claim that by engaging in a certain way with something clearly *finite* (a poem, for example), that we might risk encountering anything wild or surprising.

It is not the forum here for me to enter into a too-extended elaboration of what constitutes practice.

However, we can confidently contend that everyday activities that might attract the denomination ‘practice’—gardening, karate, golf, classical ballet, playing the violin, reading a ‘religious’ text, hiking, cooking, to name a few—all involve an aspect of *something being repeated*.

In a way, practice distinguishes itself from, say, a *performance* of a violin concerto insofar as it explicitly repeats (scales, partitas, certain physical manoeuvres of the fingers, in this case). The performance, on the other hand, would seem, at least ostensibly, to be a one-off. Now although, in our example, the performance might seem to present a unique, new moment to the world, I would argue that this appearance of the ‘new’ has been prepared for, and that *the change has already taken place* on another register, during *practice*. By register, I mean another layer, concealed by or operating quietly ‘below’, the abstracted layer of the ‘contraction’ that is the global appearance of ‘playing’ (see generally Deleuze, 2004a, Chapter 2 and the discussion of contraction and synthesis). James Williams, addressing the Deleuzian approach to events, explains the following, which I think supports this framing:

‘The event is not merely an actual event for an identifiable person ... The event must be thought of primarily as an occurrence at the level of the virtual—as something that resists identification’ (2013: 80).

In other words, the kinds of change that might manifest as obvious difference in the world around us are, for Deleuze, unleashed at another ‘level’, where the difference is so ‘different’ that no system can as yet classify it.

The virtuosity of execution of a certain section of the piece of music, heard in the concert hall, was prepared for by a change in the capacity of the musician to *do* differently—the tendons of the fingers actually changed, the pathway of the bow was refined—and the result is that the performance is new, surprising, perhaps even life-changing for its listeners.

Sure, you might say, *practice makes perfect*. That’s nothing new. However, I would emphasise that our interest here is not on the ‘perfect’ at all. We have, if anything, a completely subtractive relationship (that is, *non*-relation) to the notion of perfection. Perfection, it must also be said, usually conceals notions of harking back to a (desirable or fantasised) origin, echoing the Platonic notion of difference, which is one obtaining between model and the copy (see Williams 2013: 60).

What interests me regarding practice, quite aside from the perfection snag, is that its mechanisms are precisely of the kind that court the new. Or, better stated, practice is a strange activity whereby the practitioner *does not preclude* the new, does not shut out difference. Of course, I have to use italics here to make my slightly oblique point. Since, our so-called ‘actions’ are usually habit, our ‘doings’ are often witless repetitions of what we know—contracted habits. To ‘do’ (in the sense of known movements, reactions, patterns and so on) is, therefore, always already to preclude the new. The *practitioner’s* ‘doing’, on the other hand, is a quite unusual not-precluding of the new. She does this by *actively* repeating. More precisely, she finds the Achilles heel of habit, as our most quotidian form of repetition, in order to discover that habit can only remain habit when it is done habitually.

This amounts to practice consisting of a *two-tiered structure*. Returning to my primary example in this paper, namely poetry, we could distinguish (yet also link) the learning of a poetic artefact from the subsequent movement it unleashes when the poem starts to work in the memoriser, when they start to put its

movement ‘into practice’. We can aphorise these two tiers to: *before we can actively repeat our habit, we have to acquire it.*²

Finally, practice is a little like setting up a laboratory for change. It often demands certain conditions that are akin to the rarefied climes of science. It is often undertaken at a time or in a location that is separate from the humdrum. This distance can throw into perspective the analogous workings of what happens in practice and what might be happening in ‘life’.

So the student—the poor, put-upon first year student—is told to memorise the poem. He makes an attempt at this. It is very hard. He has to concentrate a lot, reading aloud certain indecipherable sections over and over. The lines slip away. He becomes frustrated and fantasises conversations where he gives his tutor a taste of his indignation. He abandons the poem to check his social networking sites. A little frightened of his tutor, however, who can sometimes appear very stern, he returns to the poem. He has never tried to memorise a poem, so the very newness of the undertaking is therefore even a little horrifying. He manages to recite haltingly to his bedroom ceiling the first two stanzas. It continues to be horrifying, but the sliver of ground gained is unexpectedly satisfying. He perseveres. He microwaves yesterday’s pasta sauce. He eats and continues. In class on Monday they are set on humiliating him and ruining his chances with the girl who sits near the door. Will it be to his advantage to know the poem, or to feign indifference to slavish assignments?

Now, let’s say the student manages to learn the entire poem faultlessly by heart. Not only will the labour of the learning constitute one tier of what I am calling practice, but the artefact, now learned, can be considered a habit that can now be inhabited actively (second tier). The moment in practice of opening onto contingency would begin when—armed with this internalised artefact, as a ‘tool’ of experimentation—the student begins to engage with his acquired habit as a kind of active repetition. If quotidian repetition is often involuntary, my claim is that something startling happens when we turn back towards repetition, as such, transforming our relation to that which we usually (habitually) flee, and which therefore, invariably, return). Deleuze makes clear that it is not so much a question of our having habits, but rather that we *are* our habits. We are habits on every register. We are held together by habits. Our staying alive requires the beating repetition of our heart—our diastolic and systolic habits. Now, the latter may not be the kind of habit we would wish to disrupt, however, there are other instances when our repetitions are stultifying. (The heart, in this second case, is not surprisingly the organ to which we ascribe strange whims that would seem to have the force to disrupt the habitual modes that stifle us. *The amorous organ of repetition ...*)

In summary then, learning poetry by heart, along with the ensuing capacity to repeat it actively, offer together an example of an engagement—a type of practice—which fulfils the structural requirements for the courting of radical contingency.

If we call the first tier ‘the labour of practice’, in our example of the student, it corresponds to his trying to learn the poem by heart. This moment in practice requires effort, intention, and a decision to stay with the task. It tends to facilitate a certain stabilising effect in the practitioner—the *sliver of satisfaction*. (He seems on this evening less porous to wiles of opinion on Facebook ...) It displays, in other words, the quality of what are sometimes called ‘difficult pleasures’. This is the part of practice that is most obvious to the outside observer. Practice seems to be about labouring away. It appears arduous (and *is*); it would seem to require enormous amounts of ‘application’. In the first *Padab* of Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras, the following pithy

description is offered, which reflects this first tier as I'm framing it (and I know it by heart ...):

I.13. Practice is the effort of remaining (or becoming stable) there. [*tatra stbitau yatno'bhyasah*]
(Sen-Gupta 2013: 27)

Now, the other aspect of practice operating in relation to this purposefully acquired habit (the playing of *arpeggios* on a piano, for example) is where the activity of repeating *coincides with itself*. The practitioner walks a fine line between automatism in relation to the activity (not practice), and moments of 'active' repetition. 'Active', here, is almost a misleading term, since the kind of 'doing' learned by the practitioner involves a *minimal* relationship to doing. In inhabiting the habit, the practitioner begins to approach asymptotically a line of no intervention—this is the repetition-for-itself. The habit must have been so well integrated into the person's movement and ways, that it almost requires no effort at all, and yet it cannot slip into being automated (or it would simply be mindless iteration). It must retain, instead, the most minimal trace possible of being *motivated*. It is a liminal mode, to say the least. This is why I used the term 'to court' in relation to the newness it might unleash, since this very nuanced mode has more in common with the levity of playful, and humble, wooing than with coercion or confident assertion.

To 'court' newness, if it were ever possible, might involve active repetition interrupting—if only for the most minute instant—habitual repetition. (Practitioners know that it is nothing like a recipe.) Our decision to repeat, with no clear goal, except for making repetition coincide with itself as repetition-for-itself, may open habitual repetition onto difference. To quote Deleuze:

Between a repetition which never ceases to unravel itself and a repetition which is deployed and conserved for us in the space of representation *there was difference, the for-itself of repetition ...*
Difference inhabits repetition. (2004a: 97, emphasis added)

If Deleuze's contribution is to describe the slippery nature of both difference and repetition proper, along with their peculiar relationship, my hope in this paper is to demonstrate (or delineate) cases or examples in which we might see his framing *work*. If, as he argues throughout his 1969 work (2004a) difference-in-itself logically precedes the fixities of identity and representation, of what we've known and what we can recognise in advance, then for any of us with curiosities about change or radical newness, the question will be how to unlock this difference-in-itself from its hiding place beneath the shapes of the habitual and the known. Difference is, Deleuze states above, the for-itself of repetition. When we repeat actively in order *to repeat only for repetition's sake*, with no other intention, and in order to encourage repetition to coincide with itself, then we are structurally aligning our manoeuvres with how difference moves. In other words, we might court the 'new', court an opening to something *different* by learning the intricacies of difference in itself. This pursuit leads us right to repetition.

A framework for the empty form of the future

Argument 2(b) & Conclusion

So the affirmation of real difference must be a shedding of ballast that neither affirms a well-defined thing or identity nor negates one. This again explains the importance of Deleuze's turn to Nietzsche's eternal return, where affirming is an action that allows pure difference to return *and where only pure difference actually returns*. The doctrine of eternal return is at

the heart of Deleuze's principle of forgetting, where to forget is to leave things behind through the affirmation of something that is itself not carried on.

—*Gilles Deleuze's difference and repetition* (Williams 2013: 84;

emphasis

added)

Let us now return, if not to poetry, to a slightly more poetic framing of what I have been attempting to argue. In the 'Repetition for Itself' chapter of *Difference and repetition*, Deleuze outlines very thoroughly a version of the three syntheses of time (2004a: 90-156). The first concerns how we might understand the 'living present'—the passive contraction within imagination of disconnected instants, into something that operates like present-ness—imagination as a kind of sensitive plate, on which fleeting 'instants' gather themselves, enabling duration to 'arise'. This first synthesis frames time from the standpoint of the 'present', with the past and the future like tendrils reaching "forwards" and "backwards". The second synthesis concerns Deleuze's (and others') notion of a 'pure past', a register in which everything that could be present is stored, like a monstrous 'archive' constantly integrating the 'present', and allowing it to 'pass' (see Williams 2013: 102-3). After long and thorough explanations of the first two syntheses (which are too intricate to elaborate adequately here, and to which my cursory summary does scant justice), Deleuze finally moves towards a possible framing of the third synthesis of time, which he presents via the concept of the eternal return of Friedrich Nietzsche. The latter serves to offer a way to approach what we might term 'future'. Let's quote Deleuze on this point to avoid the pitfalls of imprecise paraphrasing:

Eternal return, in its esoteric truth, concerns—and can concern—only the third time of the series. Only there is it determined. That is why it is properly called a belief of the future, a belief in the future. Eternal return affects only the new, what is produced *under the conditions of default and by the intermediary of metamorphosis*. However it causes neither the condition nor the agent to return: on the contrary, it repudiates these and expels them with all its centrifugal force. It constitutes the autonomy of the product, the independence of the work. *It is repetition by excess* which leaves intact nothing of the default or the *becoming-equal*. It is itself the new, complete novelty. It is by itself the third time of the series, *the future as such*. (2004a: 113, emphasis added)

The hypothetical question of Nietzsche's demon in *The gay science* works to lay bare a person's response to the 'burden' of the idea of unstoppable repetition—of 'every pain and joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great' (2001: 194). But the prospect is hardly speculative. Viewed starkly, it intimates horrifyingly what might anyhow be the case. We *do* repeat. We *are* habits. And by fleeing our repetitions, turning aside from habit's force, remaining ignorant of its mechanism, we more often preclude the future, than open it out. This is the paradox. Practice, I have contended here, would be that engagement which stages the hypothetical question of Nietzsche's demon and embodies affirmation. In its first tier, I would argue, through that labour of 'becoming stable there', it prepares the practitioner, rendering them resilient enough to face the terror of affirmation. As I see it, this constitutes a trial at the level of body. Thus, 'formed' (through our engagements with the often demanding versions of form—the difficult poem, the complex *kata*, the cascading scales), we have the capacity to *affirm*, or to make repetition coincide with itself. Our affirmation is a willingness to *add nothing*, to repeat our life without shirking modification, without fantasised extras, without wincing little adjustments. We must practice as 'who we are'. We take repetition to its 'excess'. In the quote above, I read 'the conditions of default and by the intermediary of metamorphosis' as corresponding to the two tiers of practice as I have outlined them. We

learn the poetic artefact without quibbling. It is not about choice, or *not choice as we know it*. From this condition of default is engendered a monstrous metamorphosis—it is the future, as pure form of time, without content, and without our being there (as we have known ourselves) as any kind of ‘agent’. This take on the ‘agent’ is of one who can only affirm through repetition what has been and what is. Here we see hints of both Nietzsche’s and Deleuze’s wholly radical framing of agency. It is one, as Deleuze states above, in which the agent is ‘expelled’, arriving in the future as something unrecognisable, having forgotten blithely from whence it came. (See Williams 2013: 84 quoted above).

The humble poem and the simple practice of rote learning, I would like to conclude, is one instrument via which we may encounter the operation of eternal return. For all the reasons outlined above, learning poetry by heart is adequate to this courting of wild contingency—providing a frame for the formless. This is analogous to time as pure form (as frame), serving as vehicle for the formless (and therefore *open*) future hurtling ‘towards us’. It is not accidental that the Deleuze quotation (2004a: 113) above mentions both ‘the work’ and ‘novelty’—terms familiar to the realm of art. The poem (itself a trace of art) provides the form which shall, via the mechanism of eternal return, be emptied of all content to become the pure form of the future.

To actively repeat, therefore, to seek repetition rather than the paltry differences that are scattered among what we know, is to affirm the repetitions that we are, and in this horrifying gesture of affirmation, the future comes. The student may end up reciting that poem to the child he has with the girl who once sat near the door. Or it may happen that he never sees her again. Or ... Or ... Or ...

1. My thanks to Dr Jon Roffe, and the Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy Evening School 2011, for helpfully unpacking this lineage.

2. I am grateful to Orit Sen-Gupta for suggestions of emphasis regarding the two-tiered structure of practice.

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