

Romance and Repetition: Testing the Limits of Love

Lynne Pearce

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Abstract: Following on from my previous work in *Romance Writing* on the “deep structures” of romance, this article speculates further on the temporality of romantic love: in particular, the problems posed by *repetition*. In the course of my discussion, I move from a consideration of how the various schools of theory that inform our understanding of romantic love deal with repetition, to some suggestions of how romantic literature has negotiated (or, more typically, side-stepped) the issue, before closing with a reflection on the further insights provided by Sarah Waters’s best-selling novel, *The Night Watch* (2006). The complexity of the relationships featured in this text enable us to probe deeper into how the human subject’s notional *compulsion to repetition* (Freud) both generates romantic relationships and tests the limits of our more ideal definitions of love.

About the Author: Lynne Pearce is Professor of Literary Theory and Women’s Writing at Lancaster University and has recently come to the end of her term as Principal Investigator for the AHRC-funded research project, “Moving Manchester: How the experience of migration has informed writing in Greater Manchester from 1960 to the present” (2006-2010) (see <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/movingmanchester>). Her principal publications include: *Woman/Image/Text: Readings in Pre-Raphaelite Art & Literature* (1991); *Reading Dialogics* (1994); *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (1997); *Devolving Identities: Feminist Readings in Home & Belonging* (ed.) (2000); *The Rhetorics of Feminism* (2004); *Romance Writing* (2007). In the field of romance studies, she is also joint editor with Jackie Stacey of *Romance Revisited* (1995) and with Gina Wisker of *Fatal Attractions: Rescripting Romance in Literature and Film* (1998).

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The need for, yet denial of, repetition constitutes a paradox that seems set to confound romantic love for ever more. Inasmuch as many of our most enduring definitions of love regard its *non*-repeatability as key (“love is forever”; “you and no other” etc), and others (particularly those stemming from psychoanalysis) regard the human subject’s *compulsion to repetition* as equally non-negotiable, philosophical tension and dispute are guaranteed; and inasmuch as the romance *genre* depends upon an inexorable process of repeating and refiguring narrative and other conventions, so must the tension also live on in the *love story* itself. Repetition, in other words, is the seemingly inexhaustible, yet infinitely exhausting, life-blood of romance, regardless of whether the story in question is bound for tragedy (where death is invoked to vouchsafe love’s non-repeatability) or a “happy ending” (where past relationships, as well as new ones glimmering darkly on the horizon, are temporarily dazzled and silenced by an all consuming present). In this article I reflect further upon the theoretical and philosophical challenges that repetition poses for romantic love (the discourse and the genre) before turning to Sarah Waters’s novel, *The Night Watch* (2006) to reveal under what circumstances repetition may, indeed, become the enemy of romance.

Love as Repetition-Compulsion: The View from Psychoanalysis

Without wishing to rehearse in any detail those psychoanalytic theories of subject and sexual development that offer, often incidentally, some insight into the set of emotions commonly referred to as “love,” it is useful to begin this discussion of romance and/as repetition with reference to the work of Freud and Lacan (whose writings on the subject are, of course, themselves complicit in the circulation of amorous discourse [cf. Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse*]).

For Freud, the patterns of adult love-relationships can be linked explicitly to early psychosexual developments in terms of both gender identity (and identification) and power. The oedipal attachments of children to their parents are repeated in love relationships in later life, including both the initial idealisation of/obsession with the love-object and the accompanying jealousy and hostility felt towards any rivals for that object’s affections (“On Narcissism”). Although problematic in feminist terms—not least because of its assumption that all desire is, by default, phallogentric and heterosexual—the tensions Freud exposes in early childhood arguably do find their echoes in adult relationships, in the subject’s desire to possess both *what is not strictly hers* (inasmuch as our parents belong, first and foremost, to each other) *and what is not easily had* (seduction, deviousness, and general “bad-behaviour” may well be involved [see Gallop]). Furthermore, according to Freud’s repetition-compulsion hypothesis (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle”), it is the difficulty and/or failure of these childhood attempts to win affection that causes us to want to repeat them later in life, sometimes to the extent of seeking out an overtly hostile or inaccessible love-object (see Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*). In his essay on “The Uncanny,” Freud gives additional spin to his hypothesis by implying that the compulsion to repeat is stronger than “the pleasure principle”: that is, the compulsion to sex itself. He writes:

In the unconscious mind we can recognize the dominance of a *compulsion to repeat*, which proceeds from instinctual impulses. This compulsion probably depends on the essential nature of the drives themselves. It is strong enough to override the pleasure principle and lend a demonic character to certain aspects of mental life. (145)

The implications of this startling realization for Freud were, of course, profound (ending in his hypothesis of the “death-drive”), but here I wish simply to note the gauntlet it throws down to all theories of love that are predicated upon the power exerted by an ideal *object*. For Freud, in this instance, the “object” has completely disappeared: we repeat, not in order to find “the other,” nor even a missing part of “ourselves,” but simply for the pleasure and empowerment of repetition itself.

For Lacan, meanwhile, it is the fact that *all* desire is, by definition, unmet and unmeetable—the intolerable Lack that grounds the human condition—that explains our compulsive tendency towards repetition in adult life (*Ethics* 151). Because of the fundamentally narcissistic character of the human subject, whose first love affair is an idealised encounter with the self, all subsequent attempts at relationships are characterised by a desire to return to this original state of imagined wholeness (“immortality”); and all, of course, are doomed to fail: “For what is love other than banging one’s head against a wall, since there is no sexual relation?” (“Seminar” 170). As Fred Botting observes, it is prognoses such as these that situate Lacan firmly to one side of all the theorists and artists that explain love as “*the self’s completion of fulfilment*” (27, emphasis added). While this end point may, admittedly, be the *desire* that fuels the process, Lacan’s narcissistic reflex is, in practice, far bleaker: for Lacan, the lover is banging his or her head against a wall not because the “thing” that s/he is seeking is no other than him/herself, but because that “self” is, itself, illusory and lost: a mere “sexed living being [. . .] no longer immortal” (Botting 27). While, at first sight, this claim may seem rather perversely counter-intuitive (surely the “sexed living being” *is* a subject of sorts, capable of participating in relationships that are capable of delivering *mortal* comfort and satisfaction?), it is important to remember that Lacan’s theory is not concerned with the everyday *practice* of desire but rather its psychic origins; in particular, the way in which our egotistical fantasies (where we aspire to be *extra-ordinary* beings) are repeatedly undermined by the disillusioning events of everyday life, including the romantic encounter. As Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse* dramatizes so vividly, the condition of being-in-love is circumscribed by the threat that the other/lover will turn out to be rather less than “ideal” (25-8): merely another “sexed living being,” in fact, who can no longer deliver the subject from his/her own pitiful insignificance.

In the Lacanian economy, then, the notion of a “pure love” that is exclusive and *non-repeatable* is quite simply unthinkable: love, inasmuch as it can be said to exist at all, is *only* repeatable. Because we are never going to find what we desire (since the “ideal” lover/other will always, ultimately, fail us) we are compelled to keep searching and thus stave off the nightmare encounter with our own profound ordinariness and mortality.

Both Freud and Lacan, then, can be seen to have produced theories that move repetition to the centre of adult sexual desire and, by implication, test the limits of more idealised, object-centred definitions of love. Jessica Benjamin, too, sees the habitual tendency to repetition within the (typically asymmetric) family unit as key to the

perpetuation of unequal power-relationships in adult life, often with recourse to sadistic/masochistic subject positioning (*The Bonds of Love*), even though—in contrast to Freud and Lacan—she does not regard either the originating dynamics or their reproduction as necessary or inevitable. Although destructive patterns of relationship may have become habitual in the contemporary Western world, it is a repetition that can, with effort, be broken (*Like Subjects, Love Objects*). In general, however, it may be said that, for psychoanalysis, “love” is a palliative discourse that seeks to conceal the unrealizable (and therefore insatiable) desire(s) that subtend it.

Love as Essence: The Philosophical Tradition

What any investigation of the history of romantic love quickly teaches us, however, is that psychoanalysis is a relatively recent and, in many respects, tangential, addition to the vast pantheon of philosophical and theological writings on the subject. Recent publications (for example, Høystad’s *A History of the Heart*) reveal that there are still a large number of scholars investigating “love” from within a tradition that looks back to Greek and other ancient cultures and has little interest in psychoanalytic explanations. For contemporary philosophers like Alan Soble, for instance, the quest remains rigorously metaphysical: the concern is not with how love *functions* (either as an ideology or as psychic mechanism), but with what *it is*, as an essence, as an aspect of Being.

While there are many ways of attempting to answer this question within a metaphysical tradition, it is clear that temporality has always been a key determinant in both defining and ascribing value to love. Similarly, wherever one looks in the history of Western literature and popular culture—be it folk-songs, Arthurian Legend, or, indeed, popular romantic fiction—there are few instances of love that are not tested, to a greater or a lesser extent, by time: through non-repeatability, simple longevity, or love’s capacity to survive the use, loss, or death of the beloved object.^[1]

It is in the annals of philosophy, meanwhile, that we find the clearest proposition that love is an event *defined* by exclusivity and *non-repeatability*: inasmuch as “genuine love” is expected to survive the loss or death of the other, the issue of its repetition *via* a subsequent relationship becomes irrelevant. There is no need to repeat the experience since the first love lives on: “Love never dies.” Such a view is consistent with the defining characteristics of what, in the classical tradition, is known as “Agapic Love” (Pearce 4-6). In contrast to “Erosic Love,” which arises from a cognitive appreciation of another’s qualities, Agapic Love is predicated upon an idealized, some may even say fundamentalist, set of “first principles” that have exclusivity and non-repeatability at their core:

EROS

Love of individual

Based on personal properties

Object-centred

Repeatable

Indefinite

Rational

AGAPE

Love of God / Neighbour(s)

Involuntary / unconditional

Subject-centred

Non-repeatable

Infinite

Irrational

Bodily	Spiritual	
Heaven-bound	Heaven-present	(Pearce 5)

As may be seen from this table of comparative features, Agapic Love is distinguished from Erosic Love through a series of binaries that places it firmly within a transcendental philosophical tradition. As I observe in *Romance Writing* (4-5), there are significant problems with this set of oppositions (derived from a number of philosophical texts which invoke Eros and Agape in their quest for a credible definition of “love”). These include both their rather crudely oppositional relationship to one another (e.g., “object-centred” vs. “subject-centred”) and, in terms of internal consistency, the way in which Agape’s association with the “love of God” and the “love of one’s neighbours” (both familiar to us as Christian injunctions) implies a degree of *conscious* piety at variance with the attendant notion of “unconditionality” and, it must be said, any love that includes erotic elements. If we take “spirituality” as the key term binding all the Agapic elements, however, the collocation makes better sense because of its association with both subject-centred fulfilment and sublimation. What binds together all the terms in the right-hand column is arguably the notion that love comes to us in a sudden, involuntary access of emotion (often expressed as an “out-pouring”) that, once-begun, is unstoppable and hence non-repeatable: the Agapic lover, thus construed, needs only to be struck once to be struck forever. A floodgate has been opened, and the waters of love will flow endlessly (towards God, towards neighbours, and towards one’s elective partner). The conversion of this “outpouring” towards an/other into intensely solipsistic spiritual satisfaction is familiar to us through the conventions of courtly love poetry which, according to de Rougement, is ultimately an exercise in spiritual salvation: “Passion has thus played the part of a purifying ideal” (45-6). In signal contrast to the psychoanalytic models of desire discussed previously, Agapic Love delivers so consummately that it is inexhaustible and without need of repetition.

As with all binaristic thought, moreover, it is not difficult to see how Agapic Love, which is so manifestly on the side of the angels, has become the dominant term within metaphysics, and why more recent philosophers like Alan Soble have had to work so hard to prove that Erosic Love isn’t merely a mundane and compromised version of “the real thing.” Further, as Soble himself argues, it is important to recognise that what we think of today as specifically *romantic love* very clearly combines features of both Eros and Agape; in particular, romantic love can sometimes seem to arise from the personal properties of the beloved (for example, their goodness and/or beauty), but on other occasions manifests itself as an involuntary and unpredictable shot from the blue—as in the proverbial “love at first sight.” I nevertheless believe that it is *the persistence of the binary itself* in our everyday thinking about love (in particular, our tendency to contrast something called true love with its ephemeral imitation) that helps explain why, despite the persuasiveness of the psychoanalytic models, Western culture still clings to the notion that “true love” is both durable and non-repeatable: it is, by definition, an emotion that *stands the test of time*.

A similar absolutism is to be found in the work of contemporary French philosopher, Jean Luc Nancy, who, like myself, has preferred to understand and define love vis-à-vis the radical transformation experienced by the amorous subject at the moment of *ravissement* (Barthes 189). My own proposition, expressed through the equation $x + y \rightarrow x'$

+ y' (*Romance Writing* 2007 1 *et seq.*), is, quite simply, that it is the change wrought upon the lover at the moment of *ravissement* that most surely prevents him or her from being capable of repeating the event a second time inasmuch as s/he is now no longer the person s/he once was. On the surface this is an unremarkable observation, but it is striking how rarely the changes to the *lover* (x) are considered when theorists and philosophers debate the reproducibility, or not, of love. All the attention has traditionally been focused, instead, on the (lost) love-object: whether *that* is, or is not, replaceable. However, Nancy, too, has observed that the trouble is rather with the lover who, having undergone a transformation akin to a chemical reaction, is unable to return to his or her previous state. Working with the evocative *motif* of the “shattered heart,” Nancy writes:

I do not return to myself *from* love [. . .] I do not return from it, and consequently, something of *I* is definitively lost or dissociated in its act of loving. That is undoubtedly why *I* return [. . .] but *I* return broken: I come back to myself, or I come out of it, broken. The “return” does not annul the break; it neither repairs it nor sublates it, for the return in fact takes place across the break itself, keeping it open. Love represents *I* to itself broken [. . .]’ (96)

A little later, Nancy reiterates the radical consequences of this break not only for the subject-in-love but for the subject *per se*:

For the break is a break in his self-possession as a subject; it is, essentially, an interruption in the process of relating oneself to oneself outside of oneself. From then on, *I* is *constituted broken*. As soon as there is love, the slightest act of love, the slightest spark, there is the ontological fissure that cuts across and disconnects the elements of the subject-proper—the fibers of its heart. (96)

Although the cadences of Nancy’s prose (in translation, at least) make this “shattering” of the heart and self in the act of love appear tragic, it is clearly also possible to embrace this uni-directional model of love as evidence of love’s miracle: $x + y \rightarrow x' + y'$.

To summarize, then: what I hope to have shown in the first part of this article is that the question of whether love is, or is not, repeatable is at the very centre of attempts to both define and understand it. I have shown how, and why, certain theories and intellectual traditions (notably, the philosophical and theological) posit love as either metaphysically or practicably *non-repeatable*, while others (notably, the psychoanalytic tradition) have argued that love (albeit reconfigured as *desire*) is *nothing but* repetition.[\[2\]](#)

It is, of course, possible to escape this impasse, as Soble has done, by signing up to an essentially Erosic definition of “Personal Love” (5) which is fully rational and voluntary and predicated upon admirable qualities in the beloved (Pearce 4-6). Inasmuch as this love arises as the result of an individual being smitten by the unique properties of particular individuals, it is acceptable for a subject to be enamoured of more than one individual in a lifetime: hence the logic of the widower who claims, “I can love my second wife as much as my first because they are so completely different.” For the purposes of this article, however,

I have chosen to leave the Erosic variant to one side in order that we may focus more closely on the more dramatic—and certainly more *traumatic*—tension that exists between the discourses of Agapic love and the “will-to-repetition” as figured by psychoanalysis.

In anticipation of the discussion of Waters’s novel that follows, my particular interest is in the crisis that arises when the non-repeatability—implicit in the most ancient descriptors of “Love” as an involuntary affect which, once ignited, is both “shattering” and inexhaustible—is challenged by the desire or need to repeat the first, earth-moving event a second time (typically as the result of the death of a former beloved). In other words, I shall be focusing on the tension—and agony—that proceeds from the fact that, rather than enter into a new experience with a different person (as is possible within the Erosic model), all the amorous subject wants is “the same again” even though s/he soon discovers that this will necessarily undermine the “totality” of the first love. This, of course, is the moment that Lacan comes knocking on the door (“I told you so!”) and the lover, thus held to account, may suddenly, if perversely, hope that his or her attempt to repeat the love affair will *fail* in order to prove that the first love was “true” and the beloved rather more than an (reproducible) object-ideal.

In the second part of this article I thus move on to consider the implications of repetition for romantic fiction writing: first, in terms of the different narrative responses available to authors; and second, through some reflections on Sarah Waters’s *The Night Watch* (2006), a novel which very self-consciously deploys repetition to test the limits of love.

Romance and Repetition: The Literary Response

A moment’s reflection will be enough to remind all readers of this article of the debt that the romance genre owes to repetition *as compulsion*. The philosophical conundrum of whether or not “genuine” love is repeatable arguably matters very little to the writers and readers of romance as long as the appetite to repeat the story *per se* remains. Indeed, it may be argued that it is in the context of its textual consumption that the paradoxical status of love *vis-à-vis* repetition is rendered a positive delight inasmuch as stories which celebrate non-repeatable love can, themselves, be repeated: and according to de Rougemont, this is *the* story (originating with the tragic tale of Tristan and Iseult) that Western Civilization has most wanted to hear (23-37).

The history of the romance genre, especially the trajectory that runs from courtship fiction through to contemporary popular romance, must nevertheless be seen to challenge de Rougemont’s view of its readership. For many, romance has become synonymous with the promise of “happy endings” and this has necessarily given rise to storylines where the possibility of repetition stalks both past and future: the relationships the lover(s) may have had before and the ones that are yet to come.

How romantic fiction has, in practice, dealt with the spectre of repetition is surely a question worthy of investigation, and—although I have not had the opportunity to conduct such a survey as yet—I offer below some hypothetical models predicated upon the canon of classic romance:

1. **Happy Marriage:** The most popular solution to the problem is to avoid repetition completely by focusing on only *one* relationship for the duration of the story and then bring the romance in question to a clean and definitive ending in marriage (“the white wedding”). If previous relationships did feature for one or both of the parties, they are very manifestly not “the real thing” and explained away (see 2 and 3 following). Even though common-sense tells us that it is impossible for any relationship to come to a fixed point, the illusion of closure remains one of the most singular pleasures that romance fiction trades in.
2. **Discredited Former Relationship 1:** As in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* wherein Romeo is enamoured of a girl called Rosalind before he meets with Juliet. Although this “repetition” of behaviour has the potential to debase “genuine love,” Romeo’s devotion to Rosalind is treated comically, with the Nurse roundly sending up his heart-sick lament. Discrediting previous relationships through the implication that they were (for example) predicated upon lust, or convenience, rather than love is clearly a neat way of solving the repetition problem. In other words, the characters (and especially the male characters) can be permitted more than one relationship, providing that only the current one is “the real thing.”
3. **Discredited Former Relationship 2:** As in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, there is also the possibility of a character having been “in love” more than once through a plot device which ensures that that the previous *love-object* is retrospectively discredited. This scenario was perfected in Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, a text in which it is possible to accept that Maxim loved *both* Rebecca and the narrator but only because his first wife is subsequently exposed as “not quite all that she seemed.”
4. **Definitive Death:** Here the notional finitude of marriage is replaced by the absolute finitude of death. The fact that there is *no* possibility of death-bound lovers repeating, and hence discrediting, their UR-passion explains why tragedy remains the most cast-iron means of supporting the view that love is exclusive, non-repeatable, and *forever*. The fact that so many tragic lovers actively *seek* death as a means of protecting their love from compromise underlines the principle that “true love” eschews repetition.
5. **Duplicitous Afterlife:** Although clearly a variant of “Death,” the solution offered by Gothic Romance is remarkable inasmuch as it simultaneously eschews and embraces repetition. While it is true that the star-crossed lovers at the centre of a Gothic Romance must *never* be seen to recover from their (one and only) love or its loss, this need not prevent them attempting a re-union with the lost loved-object (or, on occasion, his/her “double”) beyond the grave. Further, the crimes and mishaps that have caused the lovers to be doomed are subsequently seen to repeat those of their forbears and/or to generate a repetition in future generations (Pearce 86). In this respect, then, Gothic Romance must be seen as an instance of a genre both having its cake and eating it: “Genuine Love” is, *of course*, unique and forever—but so is *the* (doomed) *will-to-repetition*.

Taken together, then, what these models suggest is that, throughout history, romance has been consummately successful in side-stepping the problem that repetition poses for the integrity of love, through plot devices that either draw the curtain on

previous/subsequent relationships or, alternatively, find some means of discrediting former love-affairs after the event. Gothic Romance is an interesting variant inasmuch as it ideologically adheres to the non-repeatability of “*genuine* love” while shamelessly indulging the Freudian will-to-repetition through supernatural possibilities.

What I would next like to propose is that, from the early-to-mid twentieth century onwards, the paradox of love’s “compulsive (non) repeatability” has been actively embraced by writers in search of a more honest account of how we wrestle with our drives and belief systems when in pursuit of love. Rather than a problem to be artfully evaded, repetition has been moved to the centre of contemporary literary fiction (high-profile examples in the UK would include Doris Lessing, Muriel Spark, Anita Brookner, Ian McEwan, Hanif Kureishi, and A.L. Kennedy), even if the “fallen worlds” in which these love stories typically take place cannot easily be compared with the *zeitgeist* of popular romantic fiction.

Sarah Waters’ *The Night Watch* (2006)

In Sarah Waters’s *The Night Watch*, love’s repeatability—or not—is *the* existential question that propels the text’s story-line and presses upon its characters as a trauma every bit as nerve-splitting as the Blitz. For readers not familiar with the novel, the action is set in London during and immediately after the Second World War, with the story of the novel’s chief protagonists (Kay, Helen, and Julia; Viv and Reggie; Duncan and Fraser) narrated backwards in three sections: 1947, 1944, and 1941. The effect of this temporal inversion is twofold: first, it renders starkly visible how events in our past make us the people we are today (*viz.* $x + y \rightarrow x' + y'$); secondly, it highlights the extent to which our lives are, indeed, inscribed by repetition: willed and unwilled, individual and institutional, local and national.

In *The Night Watch*, repetition is a thematic pre-occupation as well as a narrative device. While its potential for dramatic irony, not to mention (poetic) justice and revenge, makes repetition a tempting plot embellishment for any fiction writer, Waters disguises her authorial orchestration well, not least because these are life-stories in which the characters’ *will* to repetition is routinely thwarted or culminates in an unpleasant surprise (c.f. Lacan: “For what is love other than banging one’s head against a wall since *there is no sexual relation?*” [my italics] [170]). Consequently, *The Night Watch* is characterized by a series of half-repeated, half-completed events which expose the doomed will-to-repetition for what it is as well as the extent to which the war, itself, changed everything: made repetition a historical impossibility.

The generic interplay between “history” and “romance” is, indeed, one of the things that distinguishes Waters’s novel: a retrospective account of three sets of relationships that span the war and post-war period. In the manner of historical fiction, Waters also strives hard to connect the experiences of these central characters with those of the population at large by making two of them, Helen and Viv, work for a post-war dating agency. The task of finding new loves for men and women whose lives have been turned upside down by the war is seen to be very difficult indeed. As Helen observes:

People came to look for new loves, but often—or so it seemed to her—only really wanted to talk about the loves they had lost [. . .] Recently, of course, business had been booming. Servicemen, returning from overseas, found wives and girlfriends transformed out of all recognition. They came into the bureau still looking stunned. Women complained about their ex-husbands. “He wanted me to stay in all the time.” “He told me he didn’t care for my friends.” “We went back to the hotel we spent our honeymoon in, but it wasn’t the same.” (15)

The collective “will-to-repeat,” as the concluding sentence here suggests, is strong, but the common experience is one of disappointment: both pre-war existence, and the heightened sensibilities of war-time, are impossible to recapture: the breach in history suffered by the nation is similarly visited upon personal relationships. In a later conversation, Helen and Viv comment on the fact that the war, but two years hence, already seems “a long time ago” (113). And yet it is manifestly clear that, in many respects, everyone is still “living it”: as Kay, the character who is arguably having the most trouble “moving on” confesses: “I don’t want to think about it. But I don’t want to forget it either” (109).

Yet while the war’s breach in history undoubtedly contributes to the demise of the relationships explored in the novel, it cannot be held fully responsible for their trauma. This is especially true of the relationship(s) between Kay, Helen and Julia where a distinctly Freudian will-to-repetition is seen to be at work (at least, in the case of Helen and Julia). The dramatic twist, for readers unfamiliar with the text, is that Helen enters into a relationship with Julia in the knowledge that her present partner, Kay, was involved with Julia before the war. As the affair between Helen and Julia takes hold, both reveal—belatedly and, at first, unconsciously—that their attraction to each other has been fuelled by a desire to repeat the earlier relationship with Kay. Julia is curious to find out about “the wife” (i.e., Helen) that Kay preferred to her, while Helen—mistakenly believing that Kay was rejected by Julia—is fuelled by a vengeful desire to assume Kay’s former role and succeed where the latter failed. After their second, sexually-charged encounter exploring the bomb-blasted houses, churches and streets of London Helen exclaims: “This is what Kay wanted, isn’t it? I know why she did, Julia! God! I feel like—I feel like I’m her! I want to touch you, Julia. I want to touch you, like she would—” (375). The uncontrolled—indeed, “hysterical”—nature of this outburst works well to underline the unconscious and irrational nature of Helen’s will-to-repetition. Her behaviour reminds us of Freud’s reading of Hoffmann’s *The Sandman* and his conclusion that human beings are driven to repeat in their desire to achieve control, not of the other, but of their own subjectivity (“The Uncanny”). By, albeit mistakenly, fantasizing that she was repeating Kay’s actions in making love to Julia, Helen is temporarily empowered. However, as subsequent events reveal, Helen’s action has arguably very little to do with *either* Kay *or* Julia: not only is she mistaken about the nature of Kay’s relationship with Julia (as Julia later tells her: “It wasn’t like that you know [. . .] she was never in love with me” [424]), but so, too, are doubts cast about “what she sees,” quite literally, in Julia. Not only does Helen habitually regard Julia with Kay’s eyes, but there is also the suggestion that her declaration of love is following an unconscious, yet calculating, script: “She hadn’t known, until that moment, that she’d been going to utter those words; but as soon as she said them, they become true” (369). Further,

as the relationship begins to unravel, both Helen and Julia are seen to call each other's bluff on why they got involved with one another in the first place. Although, on one level, we may be inclined to think that the demise of the relationship is the sole consequence of Helen's spiralling jealousy and paranoia, a crucial segment of conversation hints at the fact that *both* characters are addicted to affairs (and, perhaps especially, affairs with women) on account of the thrill of transgression and, of course, the pleasure of repetition (which is given an extra spike in a triangulated relationship such as this):

"It always amazes me [said Julia], that's all, that it should be you who has this fucking—this fucking fixation. Is there something about affairs? Is it like—I don't know—Catholicism? One only spots the other Romans when one's practised it oneself?"

She met Helen's gaze, and looked away again. They stood in silence for a moment. Then, "Work it up your arse," said Helen. She turned and went back downstairs to the sitting room. (150-1)

Suddenly, both women are quits. Julia, who has assumed the moral and emotional high-ground in the fight thus far is, herself, reminded of her past, and present, behaviour. In retrospect, it becomes clear that neither woman entered into the relationship on account of the "special properties" she perceived in the other (*viz.* "Erosic love" as defined above) but because of the thrill of repetition itself. What Helen and Julia's story exposes, however, is the horror that awaits those successful in the chase: instead of finding the happiness and completion that eluded you formerly through some synthesis of self and other (in this instance, the fantasy of merging oneself with one's former lover by assuming her role), all that is waiting is your shadow self (Lacan's "sexed living being" [Botting 27]).

Entering into a relationship with one's partner's former lover is, it must be said, a fairly extreme means of re-igniting the spark of love and elsewhere *The Night Watch* explores some rather less convoluted types of repetition. For instance, Viv may be seen to be repeating, in increasingly banal and glamour-less ways, her wartime romance with Reggie, a married man. The irreversible bodily and psychological scars that this relationship has left on Viv are palpable: not only has she suffered a horrendous abortion, but—despite being still only twenty-five—she is described as having "something disappointed about her [. . .] a sort of greyness, a layer of grief, as fine as ash, just beneath the surface" (18). Thus, although this relationship was positively transformative of Viv at its outset, its demise has stripped her of agency and, two years after the war has ended, she is neither capable of ending it or falling in love afresh. And while Waters concludes her story with an action that is potentially redemptive (she finds Kay who "rescued" her on the night of her abortion), we are offered no assurance that she will go on to live and love again.

A similar uncertainty hangs over the fate of Viv's brother, Duncan, who has recently rediscovered Fraser: his friend and cell-mate from the war. Although the story-line suggests that Duncan's "brave" act of going to find Fraser at his house late one night might be the existential act that commits the men to a sexual relationship, there is no assurance of this either. Indeed, we have already been told how differently the men have recovered from the War (or *not*, in Duncan's case) and Fraser's homophobia is still evident in his attempts to chat up girls, including Duncan's sister.

Kay, too, begins and ends the 1947 section of the novel going, quite literally, nowhere. Her daily life, post-war, consists of wandering the bomb-blasted streets of London, all the while appearing as though she has somewhere to go—when, in fact, she hasn't: "She stepped like a person who knew exactly where they were going, and why they were going there—though the fact was, she had nothing to do, and no one to visit, no one to see. Her day was a blank, like all of her days" (6). Kay, it seems, may retrace her footsteps, but there is no sense that she will easily repeat her romantic attachment to Helen. As readers of the novel will recall, Kay's love for Helen—whom she rescues "fresh and [. . .] unmarked" (503) from a bomb-site—is the most simply romantic of all the relationships featured. Helen is Kay's "object-ideal" and, to invoke Freud on mourning ("Mourning" 252-3), has assumed a libidinal position in Kay's life that will not easily be replaced. Further, in terms of how her story is told, I would suggest that this has less to do with the impossibility of replacing Helen (or, indeed, recovering from the traumatic nature of the latter's betrayal) but rather (*viz.* Nancy's "shattered heart") the extreme and irreversible nature of her own transformation: a transformation that owes both to the war, and to Helen. As she confides to her friend, Mickey: "I've got lost in my rubble, Mickey. I can't seem to find my way across it. I don't think I *want* to cross it, that's the thing. The rubble has all my life in it still" (108).

In conclusion, then, I would suggest that Waters's *The Night Watch* is a text that can be used to think through, with some complexity, the ways in which repetition tests the limits of love. Several of the theoretical paradigms that I discussed in the first part of the article are given vivid, fictional expression in this text, each of them commenting upon the challenge posed by repetition in a different way. For example, while the behaviour of Helen and Julia may be seen to typify the Freudian will-to-repetition and its Lacanian demise, Kay may be seen to stand, heroically (but perhaps no less self-deceivingly?) for the non-repeatability of a "genuine love" that is focused on the other and entails a radical transformation of the self; meanwhile, Viv and Reggie's attempt to recycle their love would appear to be doomed to failure on account of the fact that it can never be brought to a satisfactory "romantic" conclusion: that is, marriage *or* death. Indeed, arguably the only relationship in the novel that holds out any possibility of hope for the future is that between Duncan and Fraser inasmuch as their reunion may be seen as a *continuation* of their original relationship following a period of separation rather than a repetition *per se*.

Conclusion

Staring repetition in the face is clearly not an easy thing to do. While Waters's novel is unblinking in its analysis of Helen and Julia's relationship as the lovers reprise their own, and each other's, former patterns of behaviour *vis-à-vis* the absent body of Kay, the text stops short of declaring that solipsism is the beginning, and end, of all romance. Through the parallel story of Kay's enduring love for Helen, the text keeps faith with the possibility of an ideal, if "shattered" (*viz.* Nancy), love in which the amorous subject is transformed so radically that she will not be able to "repeat" the event even if, at some point in the future, she enters into a new relationship. Even in contemporary literary fiction, then (as opposed to classic or popular romance), the final disappointment posited by Freud and Lacan

(“there is no sexual *relation*”) is too much to bear: better to give one’s self, or one’s lover, up to death or, as in Kay’s case, to stay “lost in the rubble” (106), than to concede that we repeat only for the pleasure of repeating or that our *object-ideal* is, at last, only a poor substitute for the (ever elusive) “real thing.”

It is possible, as we hurtle through the twenty-first century, that qualitatively new ways of understanding the self and the self-in-relation (not least as a consequence of the impact of virtual reality) will render the philosophical issue of whether love is or is not repeatable something of a red herring. For the moment, however, I would argue that it persists as a nagging anxiety for all those of us invested in a concept of love as an “outward motion” (Pearce 8) involving at least the fantasy of “an/other” rather than proving itself to be a tawdry, solipsistic quest. Unfortunately, the brilliance of Waters’s forensic analysis of Helen and Julia’s slide towards the Lacanian abyss renders it a very close call (147-58) (“there is more to love than this—*isn’t there?*” [my paraphrase]) and I therefore hope that the romance genre continues to find ways of living with the tension, keeping the faith.

[1] Within the folk tradition there are countless songs in which the (male) lover is separated from his beloved for long periods of time (typically, seven years) on account of war or other commitments, and the (female) beloved is required to wait patiently and faithfully for his return. In the tragic variants (e.g. “Lord Baker”, “Her Green Mantle” [see O’Connor 2002]) the lover often returns just too late (the woman is dying or has finally given up and married another) though in many instances (e.g. “The Moorlough Shore” [O’Connor 2002]) the songs include defiant professions of love (on both sides) that will follow the lovers to the grave. However, it has also been pointed out to me that popular music includes many classics that celebrate the heart’s capacity to heal and love again: for example, “Falling in Love Again” (Lerner and Hollander (1930); “Second Time Around” (Cahn and van Heusen); “I’ll Never Love Again” (Bacharach and David) which ends with the line “so at least until tomorrow / I’ll never fall in love again.”

[2]As I discuss in *Romance Writing* (19-23) it is important to keep in mind the fact that “love” and “desire” originate in very different discourses even though they are often used interchangeably in everyday speech. In my own writing, I am always mindful that desire is a psychoanalytic concept which understands affect as an expression of the psycho-sexual drives, while love (as noted in this article) is a concept that means differently across a wide range of historical and cultural discourses but which is typically bound up with metaphysical and spiritual belief-systems.

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