Daria Tunca*

"Nobody disappears. People don't just disappear": Repetition and negation as dialogic devices in Caryl Phillips's "Northern Lights"

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Abstract: This article investigates the literary significance of two linguistic devices, repetition and negation, in the fictionalized biography "Northern Lights" by British-Caribbean writer Caryl Phillips, a narrative that focuses on David Oluwale, a Nigerian immigrant to the UK who died as a result of police violence in Leeds in 1969. To recount Oluwale's story, "Northern Lights" uses a non-linear structure that juxtaposes stylistically diverse material such as eyewitness testimonies, a history of the city of Leeds, administrative documents, and passages featuring an authorial figure who apostrophizes the dead Oluwale. Analysing linguistic patterns found within and across these different textual segments, this article argues that repetition and negation play a key role in generating forms of dialogism that, in turn, implicitly indicate how "Northern Lights" positions itself towards Oluwale and his controversial story. From a more broadly methodological perspective, the article seeks to advance knowledge of how negation and repetition, when jointly studied as pragmatic phenomena, can impact literary strategies of characterization and reinforce a text's poetic effects.

Keywords: Caryl Phillips, repetition, negation, apostrophe, dialogism, pragmatics

1 Introduction

In her review of British-Caribbean writer Caryl Phillips's *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007), the volume of fictionalized biographies that includes "Northern Lights," Kate Christensen formulates the following question to express her bafflement after reading the book: "What is this guy up to here?" (2007: 38). This tone of mock-informality befittingly captures a puzzled reaction that she more conventionally describes as "a mixture of bemused perplexity and thwarted expectations" (2007: 38). *Foreigners*, she writes, is a work that explores "real-life

***Corresponding author: Daria Tunca,** English Department, University of Liège, Liège, Belgium, E-mail: dtunca@uliege.be

complexities in a visceral, nondidactic way," but in which, according to her, "rather stodgy historical passages coexist somewhat uneasily with [...] more fluid and lyrical fictionalized accounts" (2007: 38).

The generic and stylistic discrepancies that Christensen finds so disconcerting are part and parcel of Phillips's experimentation with a hybrid genre that he calls "creative biography" (Phillips in Ledent 2009: 188). Divided into three sections, *Foreigners* mixes fact and fiction to retrace the lives of three black men who lived in Britain between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries. The first section, "Dr Johnson's Watch," focuses on Samuel Johnson's Jamaican servant Francis Barber, who died in poverty even though Dr Johnson had bequeathed him a significant amount of money. The second part, "Made in Wales," depicts the rise and fall of the mixed-race boxer Randolph Turpin, who became world champion in 1951 but later incurred heavy financial debts and committed suicide in 1966. The final section, "Northern Lights," recounts the story of the Nigerian immigrant David Oluwale, who arrived in England as a stowaway on a cargo ship in 1949. He led a destitute life in Leeds that saw him repeatedly imprisoned and placed in psychiatric institutions, and he eventually died as a result of police violence in 1969. As Bénédicte Ledent points out, Phillips's volume explores these three men's lives using a variety of styles and "different narrative strategies," a diversity that may be "read as a way of paying respect to the singularity" of its protagonists (2012: 83, 84).

In earlier work, I examined some of the stylistic strategies found in the first two sections of *Foreigners* (Tunca 2017). I investigated how some of the ideologies conveyed by the narratives could be traced back to specific linguistic features, including the use of adjectives and modality, revealing how the first two sections made their own covert use of polyphony: "Dr Johnson's Watch," by featuring a seemingly benevolent yet patronizing narrator whose authority is subtly undermined by the implied author from a contemporary vantage point; and "Made in Wales," by presenting a seemingly linear narrative whose apparent factuality actually hides diverging points of view that, considered collectively, reveal all historiographical endeavours to be dissonant discursive constructions.

"Northern Lights" is far more overt than the two other stories in its use of polyphony and narrative fragmentation. The portrait of Oluwale is a "patchwork of voices" (Busby 2007) in which verbatim, edited, and fictionalized testimonies are juxtaposed with such material as administrative documents, a history of the city of Leeds, and passages where an authorial figure addresses the dead Oluwale. On one level, the structural and stylistic fragmentation that characterizes "Northern Lights" is informed by Phillips's ongoing concern with giving a formal resonance to the "disjunction" that dominates diasporic people's lives

(Phillips in McLeod 2012: 290). In the words of Stephen Clingman, commenting on Phillips's novel *A Distant Shore* (2003), the fragmented Phillipsian text "becomes an image of the world it depicts and tries to understand" (2007: 55). The fact that this comment can be applied to *A Distant Shore* and to a host of other works by the British-Caribbean author – such as his novels *The Nature of Blood* (1997) and *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), but also "Northern Lights" – indicates that fragmentation alone cannot explain why the Oluwale narrative stands out as a particularly "haunting" (Hoby 2008: 25) and "stylistically complex" (Busby 2007) text. Even Christensen, whose reservations about *Foreigners* were mentioned above, finds the section about David Oluwale "riveting and beautifully written" (2007: 38). What then has led reviewers to consider "Northern Lights" such an engaging narrative? What techniques does the author deploy in this text that he did not use in his other works in *quite* the same way?

In what follows it is argued that two linguistic devices foregrounded in "Northern Lights," repetition and negation, play a crucial role in generating forms of dialogism that, in turn, implicitly indicate how the text positions itself towards David Oluwale and his controversial story. It will further be shown that repetition and negation, sometimes combined with the use of apostrophe, are instrumental in lending the text its commemorative force. Indeed, "Northern Lights" does not merely narrate a tragic story, but may be regarded as a literary memorial that exhorts its readers to "Remember Oluwale," following an injunction anonymously written on a wall in Leeds after his death (Phillips 2007: 170, 216, 257).

2 Repetition, negation, and methodology

Readers need not go beyond the opening sentences of "Northern Lights" to encounter both repetition and negation. Told in the first person by an unnamed woman of Caribbean descent who, as a fourteen-year-old, regularly came across David Oluwale on the streets of Leeds, the narrative opens as follows:

(1) I remember he always used to wear a big black coat, and he was kind of hunched over. But not like life had beaten him down or anything. He just had this big black coat that seemed a bit too heavy for him. (2007: 167)

This passage undoubtedly has an oral "feel" to it, due to the presence of elements such as the hedges "kind of" and "or anything," and the repetition of the phrase "big black coat." However, the excerpt does not quite qualify as

"authentic" oral speech, a type of communication that would be likely to contain a high number of inserts and dysfluencies. Rather, it is an imitative *construction* of spoken discourse – in Bakhtinian terms, a "stylized" performance, "an artistic representation of another's linguistic style" (Bakhtin 1981: 362). This observation is methodologically important, in the sense that it confers potential interpretative significance on those elements typical of orality that the implied author has chosen to insert into the text. That such specific oral features were introduced into the narrative is confirmed when we learn that these opening words are based on the testimony of a woman whom Phillips interviewed in Leeds while doing research on David Oluwale. The writer did not use a tape recorder, but "scribbl[ed] and tr[ied] to write down what she was saying," and later reconstructed her testimony for the purposes of his book (Phillips, unpublished section of an interview conducted with the author on January 5, 2018 – see Ledent and Tunca 2020). Among the typically oral items used in the written text, one of the most conspicuous is verbal repetition, which I identified above.

Verbal repetition is a stylistic device that has been studied by countless generations of scholars, armed with the battery of labels provided by traditional rhetoric. In recent decades, however, critics have tended to dispense with the feverish categorization of different types of repetition, thereby keeping at bay the rhetorical tradition's "insistence on nice distinctions" (Leech 1969: 83). Still, contemporary scholars have inherited from their forebears the struggle with the ill-defined effects of the device. Verbal repetition is often broadly characterized as "expressive," "in that it gives emphasis or emotive heightening to the repeated meaning" (Leech and Short 2007: 199), but precisely what repetition is expressive of tends to remain hazy even in many contemporary stylistic analyses. This is no doubt due to the stylistic malleability of repetition; as Michael Toolan puts it, "[r]epetition is the mother device of all expressive devices, the heart of rhetoric" (1996: 253).

Another avenue of research into repetition, at the intersection of literary criticism and musicology, has focused on how repetition "contribute[s] to the evocation of a musical model" (Petermann 2014: 73). At the centre of this argument lies the belief that the device "empties the signifier out of its signified," and that "the ensuing lack of referentiality evokes the musical sign" (Petermann 2014: 73). Translated into pragmatic terms, Petermann's suggestion points to the fact that textual repetition, by flouting Grice's maxim of quantity (1975: 45–46), exalts the repeated words' musical import; this line of enquiry about the musicality of prose will briefly be pursued at a later stage in the article.[1] Petermann's insight, however, applies mostly to proximate repetition, and when looking at

1 See also Mascoli (2017, 2018) about the musical qualities of Phillips's works.

items iterated across larger portions of text, her statement needs to be nuanced with another observation borrowed from pragmatics, namely that meaning does not reside only in the literal interpretation of isolated lexemes, but is generated by co-textual and contextual factors too. This point is actually made specifically in relation to repetition by Johnstone et al. when they state that, "as the context within which [repeated] elements are used changes, their meaning changes" (1994: 12). In short, Johnstone et al. make a case for the significance of repeated words beyond the aural qualities underscored by Petermann. Such an argument is lent further weight if one considers the idea that, since aural patterns are easily noticeable even in writing, they are by definition foregrounded, hence "highly interpretable" (Jeffries and McIntyre 2010: 31). In other words, verbal repetition in literary texts – including, I argue, in "Northern Lights" – is not necessarily an end in itself, but it may work to "gain the attention of the audience" (Johnstone et al. 1994: 13) and thus act as a cue to investigate the possible meanings behind the repeated words. Reading the opening of Phillips's narrative, one must therefore ask why David Oluwale is so insistently said to be wearing a "big black coat."

While repetition may be a foregrounded element in the opening lines of "Northern Lights," the second device of interest, negation, is much more discreetly introduced: "he was kind of hunched over. But *not* like life had beaten him down or anything," the narrator declares (emphasis mine), introducing a comparison with a situation that is, remarkably enough, negated. Negation, Lisa Nahajec explains, "constructs non-events, non-states and non-existence, which seemingly have little to contribute at the surface semantic level of communication" (2009: 109). However, as several stylisticians have shown, negation is also a pragmatic phenomenon that adds to "the meaning-making potential of a text" (Nahajec 2009: 109; see also Nørgaard 2007; Nahajec 2014). Put more directly, in the words of Geoff Thompson, "we need a particular reason for talking about what is not rather than what is" (1996: 56, cited in Nørgaard 2007: 36).

In the opening of Phillips's text quoted in passage (1) above, the reason that the narrator might have for talking in the negative form comes into sharper focus after establishing that the negative structure that she uses is itself part of a concessive opposition (see Davies 2012) triggered by the coordinating conjunction "but": Oluwale was "hunched over. But [...]." The second part of a concessive opposition generally "expresses a contrast of meaning or implication of 'unexpectedness'" in relation to the first (Leech 2006: 24, cited in Davies 2012: 58) – as in the sentence "Bill studied hard but he failed the exam" (Izutsu 2008: 649, cited in Davies 2012: 58). In the excerpt from Phillips's text, the presence of a negation within the oppositional structure signals that the construction does not so much express unexpectedness as deny expectedness: Oluwale was

"hunched over," but not for the reasons that one might presume. In my estimation, the assumption that Oluwale is "hunched over" because "life [has] beaten him down" is unlikely to have been made by the average reader who has just discovered the opening sentence of the narrative and is unfamiliar with the Nigerian man's story; rather, such an assumption appears to stem from the narrator's knowledge of Oluwale's circumstances and from the conclusions that an eyewitness might have drawn from the man's appearance and demeanour. This fact, I will argue, provides a decisive clue as to the role played by negation in the overall narrative strategy deployed in "Northern Lights": from the onset, the text warns its readers not to rely on the obviously visible or supposedly known elements of Oluwale's life, thereby subtly announcing its intention to provide an alternative account of the man's tragic existence.

The above methodological preamble has established that the two devices that will be examined in this article, repetition and negation, have at least one basic feature in common: both have negligible semantic weight if one "concentrates on the meaning of the *sentence* as an abstract syntactic unit," but they acquire significance if one focuses on "the meaning of the *utterance*, which is the concrete realization of a sentence in a context of use" (Verdonk 1995: 13, emphasis in original). These devices are, therefore, best studied jointly on the basis of "a pragmatic model of meaning construction, which does not see language as a self-contained conceptual system, but as fundamentally interactive or 'dialogic'" (Verdonk 1995: 8). The presence of the Bakhtinian term "dialogic" in this description is not incidental for, as Verdonk notes, the work of the Bakhtinian circle on the one hand and contemporary pragmatic studies on the other converge in their insistence that echoic qualities of discourses extend well beyond face-to-face conversations (1995: 14). Dialogism can indeed refer to the circulation of meaning even between utterances that are "separated from one another both in time and in space," provided they have some "semantic convergence between them" (Bakhtin 1986: 124). The present article will investigate how such dialogic interaction occurs in "Northern Lights," and how it is elicited both by Phillips's "creative use of repetition" (Mascoli 2017: 8) and by his less conspicuous recourse to negation.

3 The interpretation of repetition

In his study of repetition in creative writing, Peter Verdonk posits that "readers appear to attach meanings to verbal recurrence" in a text (1995: 9). In the same vein, Andrew Caink argues that, when faced with multiple repetitions of a

lexical item, "reader[s] begi[n] to wonder why the author is repeating this word and what the relevance of it is to the wider meaning" of the text (2014: 18). This almost unconscious cognitive process explains why several literary scholars, while not primarily concerned with the formal aspects of "Northern Lights," have commented on its use of repetition and endeavoured to explain the significance of the phenomenon. Louise Yelin, for example, has set about elucidating the recurrence within the piece of its opening words, "I remember." According to her, the quintuple iteration of this phrase by the female narrator of the first fragment (Phillips 2007: 167–171) establishes her as an "exemplary witness" (Yelin 2017: 121) who heeds the call to "Remember Oluwale," referring to the graffiti noted earlier. Interestingly, the words "I remember" are scattered a further fourteen times across "Northern Lights," spoken by real-life witnesses that include a woman who used to head an anti-racist movement called the Chapeltown Commonwealth Citizens Committee, and a former policeman who condemns his colleagues' harassment and abuse of Oluwale. Both of these observers easily fit into the category of "exemplary witnesses" identified by Yelin.[2] Thus, simple reliance on foregrounding resulting from repetition already allows readers to identify "I remember" as an interpretatively significant sequence akin to a "musical leitmotif" (Caink 2014: 22) that is instrumental in reinforcing the meaning traditionally assigned to these words.

A more markedly linguistic analysis allows us to delve even further into how repetition may impact our interpretation of the text. Indeed, from a linguistic point of view, the words "I remember" do more than simply suggest that the witnesses obey the injunction to perpetuate the memory of David Oluwale: since "remember" is generally considered a factive verb, it by definition presupposes the truth of its complement (Kiparksy and Kiparsky 1970), regardless of whether this complement is "true" in actual fact. Therefore, for instance, when another witness, an unnamed Caribbean community leader, states that "I remember seeing him [Oluwale] just standing by the side of the road crying" (Phillips 2007: 229), the recalled situation is, linguistically speaking, presupposed rather than proposed; it is assumed rather than directly made accessible to debate. In other words, through its use of language, the text refrains from inviting readers

2 These individuals remain unnamed in the text, but other sources allow us to establish their identities: the woman is Maureen Baker (Farrar 2018) and the man is Alex Woolliams (Phillips 2010). Interestingly, while both are presented as "exemplary witnesses" in "Northern Lights," doubts have been raised about the factual reliability of Maureen Baker's testimony in particular (see Farrar 2018). This lends weight to the argument that Phillips's text uses specific narrative and stylistic strategies to present readers with certain versions of events; this line of argument is pursued below.

to question the reliability of this particular witness. This technique is particularly important in a narrative where, in the words of Eva Ulrike Pirker, "voices that are sympathetic towards Oluwale" co-exist with "antagonistic voices" that present the Nigerian man as violent and mentally unstable (2011: 217). In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the (admittedly shorter) testimonies of those ill-disposed towards Oluwale – such as that of the policeman Sergeant Kitching, who describes the Nigerian as a "wild animal" (Phillips 2007: 233), or that of the medical officer who regards the man as a "dullard" (2007: 224) – are not prefaced with the statement "I remember." The narrative, it seems, uses the repetition of "I remember" to subtly indicate whose subjective "truth" it would rather have us believe.

As often in Phillips's works, such a neat interpretation provides only part of the answer, for the repetition of "I remember" is complicated by the occurrence of the word "remember" in other structures than those containing the first-person singular pronoun. Most noticeably, Oluwale himself is addressed using this verb, when the authorial figure asks him if he recalls the fourteen-year-old Caribbean girl he regularly came across on the street of Leeds: "David, do you remember this girl?" (171). This question is repeated a few pages later with a slight variation: "David, do you remember the girl?" (175). This double quotation invites an analysis of two distinct aspects of repetition as it appears in "Northern Lights": the first is the repetition (with or without variation) of entire phrases or sentences, which can be separated by anything from a few words to several pages; the second is the intermittent resurfacing within the text of a particular mode of address, apostrophe, and its appendant personal pronoun "you." These issues are clearly separate on a theoretical level, since the first concerns verbal repetition, while the second rests on the recurrent use of a particular grammatical form. Yet in practice, these types of repetition overlap on many occasions in the narrative, prompting speculations about a possible correlation or interaction between the two.

These different points, it seems to me, are best addressed in successive stages so as to progressively zoom in on the blend of stylistic techniques deployed in the narrative. With this course of action in mind, I will examine a sequence of three excerpts – numbered (2), (3), and (4) below – that initially feature verbal repetition without the use of apostrophe, and which then bring in this mode of address. In between the analysis of the first two extracts, I will try to determine how the conclusions drawn thus far may be helpful in interpreting another instance of verbal repetition found in "Northern Lights," namely Oluwale's "big black coat," which was mentioned in passage (1) above. This manner of proceeding is meant to meet a triple objective: firstly, to delineate the possible stylistic effects of verbal repetition in precise passages in the text;

secondly, to establish whether particular methodological guidelines may be helpful in elucidating instances of repetition in a principled manner; thirdly, to appraise the general functions of repetition in relation to the text's overall narrative strategy.

The sequence on which I will now focus starts on the first page of "Northern Lights." The anonymous female narrator, having stated that she regularly came across David Oluwale, provides some details about her brief encounters with the Nigerian man:

(2) I always acknowledged David and he'd just say, 'Take care, behave yourself.' That's all. 'Take care, behave yourself.' (Phillips 2007: 167)

In this short excerpt, the double occurrence of the sentence in direct speech form, "Take care, behave yourself," may have an iconic tinge (in the sense that it may mimic the iteration of the greeting during the participants' successive encounters); but, in any case, the repetition is unlikely to be evaluated as straightforwardly "poetic." At first sight, it more readily fits within the "stylization" strategy mentioned above, whereby features of orality present in the text contribute to the construction of a language that reads like "ordinary" oral speech: after all, repetition is "the primary rhetorical device of spoken language" (Wales 2011: 366). Yet the presence of the adjective "rhetorical" in this statement should alert us to the fact that the poetic and the non-literary have more in common than the lay reader generally assumes to be the case. Revealingly, then, when Deborah Tannen asserts that repetition "in ordinary conversation" is among the strategies that "reflect and simultaneously create interpersonal involvement" (Tannen 2007: 1), she is merely applying to conversational analysis the previously mentioned idea that repetition in a literary work invites readers to actively engage in a process of interpretation.

And so it is with the words "Take care, behave yourself" in Phillips's text. When mentioned only once, this sentence has the unequivocal appearance of an ordinary greeting made by an adult to a child; its repetition, on the other hand, may be seen to implicitly instruct readers to look beyond the words' phatic function and to view them as a more significant element in the story. Pondering the short greeting, one might for instance surmise that Oluwale was a polite and discreet man, that he kept verbal interactions short but that he nonetheless had an inviting personality, and perhaps even that he was a caring father figure to the teenager. I would argue that it is in such cases of repetition that the literally dialogic – that is, the illusion created on the page that the narrator is speaking to an addressee – blends into Bakhtin's larger understanding of the term. Indeed, the early depiction of Oluwale as a friendly and well-mannered man

acquires decisive resonance when made to dialogize with the police's allegation, reported much later in the text, that the Nigerian man "had often been violent to those who had crossed his path" (Phillips 2007: 235).

A similar interpretative process can account for the repetition of "big black coat" in the opening sentence of the narrative. On the surface, the phrase merely seems to occur twice because "repetition is felt to suggest the lack of premeditation characteristic of ordinary speech" (Wales 2011: 366). However, the insistence on Oluwale's "big black coat" (an item that makes a third appearance on the second page of the narrative in the form "big black overcoat") may prompt further associations in the reader's mind as, in both fiction and journalistic reports, "physical attributes tend to have connotations" (Van Leeuwen 2008: 45). Even if such connotations are bound to remain imprecise (does a "big black coat" evoke mystery, menace, grimness?), the effect can nonetheless not be overlooked: Oluwale would, no doubt, have come across as a rather different person if he had repeatedly been said to wear a pink polka-dot jacket. Ultimately, then, it comes as no surprise that the man's "big black coat" hides not only a "dark suit" (Phillips 2007: 168) but also, more revealingly, a "history [he] kept locked up inside of [him]. Shut tight, out of sight" (172).

In sum, in the two examples examined above (that is, "Take care, behave yourself" and "big black coat"), repetition acts as a device supporting characterization. In the latter instance, I would argue that the dialogic function of repetition becomes even more crucial to the overall narrative strategy of the text. Indeed, the repetition of "big black coat" also appears to act as a mnemonic device, for the reader is fully expected to remember Oluwale's garment when, almost fifteen pages later, at the end of a historical fragment about the city of Leeds, a mention is made of the "townspeople, including those who in the future would dress in long black coats and stand at the bottom of Button Hill, [...] smartly attired" (Phillips 2007: 181). Even if Oluwale's "big black coat" resurfaces in a slightly different form, the occurrence of the phrase here is undoubtedly "echoically linkable" (Toolan 2012: 21) to its first few appearances – that is, the lexical echoes within the text are strong enough to intimate that the sections chronicling the development of Leeds are to be put in direct dialogue with the Nigerian man's fate.[3] It is hardly surprising, then, that seasoned critics of Phillips's work, without

3 This is confirmed by the fact that, like Oluwale's black coat, the bottom of Button Hill had been repeatedly mentioned in the text as one of the locations where the man went on a regular basis (2007: 167, 171, 175 and 176). Moreover, references to Oluwale's elegant dress sense during his first years in Leeds are found after this historical section, in passages where witnesses report that he was "smartly dressed" (183) and "smarter than most in his dress sense" (186). A subsequent historical section then mentions "the international market in ready-made 'smart'

discussing the particular instances of repetition detected here, have pointed out that the historical passages "can be seen as juxtaposing the individual story of Oluwale to the history of the city" (Birat 2013: 65) and that "Oluwale's misfortune [...] has much in common with the experience of all the immigrants, whether Jewish or Irish, who arrived in Leeds before him" (Ledent 2012: 82).

While the identification of textual echoes by literary critics shows that the general impulse behind Phillips's imaginative enterprise can be recovered by scholars using traditional hermeneutic methods, a systematic focus on verbal repetition allows the stylistician to establish associations that may otherwise go unnoticed. A single example will illustrate this. When the authorial voice, now turned homodiegetic narrator, tries to locate a pub that David Oluwale used to frequent in the Chapeltown neighbourhood of the city, he comes across a young, presumably white woman whose "eyes are wet with drugs" and who, in a "broad Yorkshire voice," repeatedly calls out to him: "Hey you, black man" (2007: 217). Most obviously, this vocative establishes a parallel between the narrator and Oluwale by evoking their common position as racial outsiders in the city. However, the narrator comments, the woman "is swathed in a big black coat" (217). At this point in the text, this garment has "[come] to accumulate" such "symbolic force by repetition" (as Leech and Short assert in relation to another text, 2007: 280) that the reader who has been attentive to the verbal pattern cannot but wonder why a white, ostensibly racially prejudiced, female drug-addict living in the twenty-first century should also be presented as a type of Oluwale figure. Since the woman "promises [the narrator] that she will do anything" (Phillips 2007: 217) – an unmistakable reference to the sexual services she is prepared to offer – I would suggest that this particular case of repetition, in Phillips's characteristically economic style, invites readers to consider gender alongside race as one of the factors of oppression that have operated in English society across time. Thus, even if the three sections of *Foreigners* focus on constructions of masculinity, the condition of women that preoccupied Phillips in much of his earlier work is still implicitly addressed in this book. Ultimately, examples such as these reinforce the idea that "planned, motivated and thoughtful repetition is a *prima facie* simplest demonstration of reflexivity, that is, of text-awareness or of self-awareness" (Toolan 2012: 23). Indeed, in its use of repetition, "Northern Lights" draws readers' attention to its status not just

clothes" (213). It is clear from these quotations that the text establishes a pattern of intertwining lexical echoes that is meant to trigger associations between Oluwale and the city of Leeds, and to intimate the fact that "history is meant to repeat itself, especially when it comes to oppression and discrimination" (Ledent 2012: 75).

as a piece with a documentary or representative function, but as an *artistic construct* that aims to engage in social commentary.

4 Repetition as an emotive and poetic device

In the case of the "big black coat," verbal repetition is ultimately put in the service of one of Phillips's literary trademarks, namely his predilection for forcing readers to "enter into imaginative dialogue" (Ledent 2014: 101) with his texts in order to decode them. However, I would argue that "Northern Lights" also makes a more singular use of repetition within the Phillipsian corpus, an idea that is best developed by bringing into the analysis the text's abundant use of apostrophe. After the female narrator of the opening fragment has just stated that "I called him David, I remember that much. I knew his name" (171), the (hitherto disembodied) authorial voice apostrophizes Oluwale for the first time:

(3) David, do you remember this girl? The fourteen-year-old girl who would walk up Chapeltown Road and see you near the bottom of Button Hill. She knew your name. Your history you kept locked up inside of you. [...] But your name, David. She knew your name, and it felt good on her tongue. She smiled and looked into your eyes, and you told her to take care of herself. You waited for her and basked in her smile, and exchanged your few words, and then you watched as she disappeared from view. (171–172)

In using the interrogative form ("David, do you remember this girl?"), the authorial voice appears to exhort Oluwale to participate in the process of remembrance enacted by the text. The particular vocative form used, Oluwale's first name "David," also bespeaks a claim to intimacy that is later embodied in the narrator's repeated address to the Nigerian man as "my friend" (193, 194, 256, 257). However, even as the narrator seems to want to draw Oluwale into a dialogue, the questions he asks his addressee "remain unanswered" (Pirker 2011: 206). This does not only happen for the obvious reason that the Nigerian man is dead – after all, his voice could easily have been recreated through fiction if the implied author had wished to do so. Instead, the option was taken to minimize access to Oluwale's speech and thoughts, a choice no doubt meant to intimate the fact that "[t]here is no possibility of imagining what might have been running through the mind of this man" (Birat 2013: 63). But why, then, does the authorial figure speak to Oluwale, even as he knows his addressee's thoughts and the details of his history to be

unrecoverable? Attending to the instances of verbal repetition contained in excerpt (3) above allows us to work towards an explanation.

Repetition indeed features prominently in this passage: the Caribbean woman's previous mention that "I knew his name", along with David's greeting to her, are taken over by the authorial figure in a form addressed to Oluwale ("She knew your name," "you told her to take care of herself"); moreover, "She knew your name" is itself repeated verbatim within the extract. Similarly, the female narrator's age has already been mentioned twice in her first-person narrative (167, 169), as has the location of her encounters with Oluwale (167, 171). As for the second part of the excerpt, it contains information that is new to the reader ("She smiled and looked into your eyes," "You waited for her and basked in her smile," "you watched as she disappeared from view") but which, within the fictional narrative setup, is already known to the primary addressee, David Oluwale, by virtue of his direct involvement in the events under discussion. This combination of characteristics – on the one hand, the heavy reliance on verbal repetition; on the other, the fact that the authorial voice does not impart to Oluwale information that is putatively unknown to the man's fictional self – allows us to establish one important fact, best explained with Jakobson's terminology: the "referential" (that is, "denotative") function of language is largely overridden by the "emotive" and "poetic" functions of the medium (Jakobson 1960). To describe a passage using the second person singular as heavily "emotive" is perhaps more surprising than may appear at first sight, for this function is defined by Jakobson as one "focused on the addresser" (1960: 354), whereas the presence of a vocative and a question in the excerpt might more readily have suggested the predominance of the "conative" function, which is "orient[ed] toward the addressee" (1960: 355). However, as previously mentioned, the addressee offers only silence in reply to the questions proffered in his direction, a fact that leads to numerous repetitions of the same questions. These repeated interrogations largely appear to be an "expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is speaking about" (Jakobson 1960: 354).

This observation allows us to determine how verbal repetition interacts with the apostrophic form in "Northern Lights." Apostrophe, in the words of Jonathan Culler, is used "to will a state of affairs, to attempt to call it into being" (2001: 154). On the basis of the many repeated questions and statements contained in Phillips's piece, I would argue that what the text calls into being is not so much a literal resurrection of the deceased Oluwale as a "poetic event" (Culler 2001: 157) in which the authorial figure is endowed with an ability to communicate with the dead man. In this context, the addressee is not simply the "real" Oluwale but also, as Delphine Munos has put it in relation to another work, a "phantasmal, intangible 'addressed you' *that only exists as a projection of the*

narrator's voice, thus extending its ethereal existence beyond the margins of diegetic time" (Munos 2013: 5, emphasis mine). Coupled with the apostrophic form, repetition then acts as an emotive device that at once intimates the authorial figure's desire to communicate with his addressee *and* the impossibility of holding such a verbal exchange, a tension that confers upon the addressed "you" a consciousness beyond the moment of its referent's physical death.

Phillips's text also exemplifies Jakobson's definition of the "poetic function" as one that makes "patent" the relationship between "sound and meaning" (1960: 373) and which "promot[es] the palpability of signs" (1960: 356). This poetic function is not only given prominence through the device of verbal repetition, but is also occasionally generated through the very choice of words selected for iteration. The most noticeable example of this is probably the short phrase that is repeated eight times in the account of Oluwale's voyage to, and arrival in, England (172–175): "Yoruba boy," a combination that contains the repetition of both consonant and semi–vowel sounds.[4] Similar poetic sound patterns are found on a few other occasions in the text, for instance in an alliterative reference to Oluwale as a "[y]oung *l*ion *l*eaving *L*agos" (173, emphasis mine), and in the later description of the psychiatric hospital where he stayed as a "crazed maze" (193). By foregrounding the poetic function, these phonological iterations – just like verbal repetitions – draw the text beyond the realm of referentiality and contribute to turning "Northern Lights" into a literary memorial whose significance resides as much in its shape and form as in its ultimate purpose of "Remembering Oluwale." In sum, it is through style that the text is lent commemorative force.

5 Repetition and musicality

As Jeffries and McIntyre remind us, "particular clustering[s] of sounds" such as those found above also have a "musical effect" (2010: 37). A similar impact is created when entire words or sentences are repeated, since "[f]ormal repetition often presupposes phonological repetition": "to repeat a word is to repeat the

4 The importance of the phonological features of this phrase is all the more salient as Oluwale's precise ethnicity plays no major role in the story and is mentioned on only one other occasion outside this sequence (2007: 233). Elsewhere in the narrative, Oluwale is more often associated with the geographical adjectives "African," "West African" or "Nigerian." The poetic quality of the phrase "Yoruba boy" can also be appreciated by considering the close semantic equivalents "Nigerian boy" or "Yoruba teenager": devoid of phonological repetition, the phrase loses part of its expressive force.

sounds of which it is composed" (Leech 1969: 75). With these reflections in mind, let us examine the final part of the sequence recounting the Caribbean girl's encounter with Oluwale, in which the authorial figure apostrophizes the Nigerian man once more:

(4) David, do you remember the girl? She did not know your history, but she knew your name. You waited for her and bathed in her smile, and exchanged your few words. And then you watched as she disappeared from view. (175)

Verbal repetition within the excerpt is virtually absent, but the repetitive nature of the passage comes to the fore when comparing it with excerpt (3) quoted above. Phrases such as "she knew your name" are repeated word for word, while other sentences are iterated with slight variations in lexis and punctuation. Using a musical analogy, one might regard such iterated segments as "riffs," phrases that are repeated verbatim or "in nearly identical form, [...] their changing context caus[ing] them to appear differently with each reiteration" (Petermann 2014: 71).[5] Alternatively, one might opt for another musical metaphor, that of the *da capo* aria, in which "the second rendition of the opening section [...], regardless of the addition of florid decoration, is different as a result of the intervening section" (Caink 2014: 22). Imperfect though both of these analogies may be to analyse "Northern Lights," they raise the important point that "iterations give rise to different inferred meanings on each occasion because of their distinct contexts" (Caink 2014: 22). This is a key observation. In Phillips's text, Oluwale is initially said to have a "history [he] kept locked up inside of [him]" (171), even as the teenager he came across "knew [his] name" (172); this idea then resurfaces three pages later in the negated opposition "She did not know your history, but she knew your name" (175). Importantly, in the interval, the reader has been acquainted with Oluwale's past: his illegal voyage to England in circumstances reminiscent of the Middle Passage (Ledent 2012: 82), his subsequent imprisonment in Leeds for this "offence," and his decision to stay in the city. As a result, the repetition that the girl "knew [his] name" despite her lack of familiarity with the man's experiences lends this apparently anecdotal fact new significance: here, as elsewhere in Phillips's work, emphasizing people's "uniqueness" is a way to underscore their "individual dignity" (Ledent

5 The musical analogy of the "riff" has been used in relation to Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993) by Mascoli (2017); it is from her work that I borrow this idea. I here use musically inspired terminology a little liberally, since Petermann sees a textual riff as consisting of repeated "short phrases or clauses" which are "generally shorter than a full sentence" (2014: 72).

2011: 75). Furthermore, even if the teenager calls him by his first name, "David," her knowledge of his identity may also be seen to provide a counterpoint to the official records' jumbled mentions of "a man named David Oluwale or Oluwole or Uluwale or Oluwuala or Uluwle" (2007: 238).[6]

In short, the musical metaphors evoked above are useful not only in highlighting the textual motifs created by repetition, but also in focusing attention on the importance of the precise points in the narrative where these motifs resurface. Additionally, the musical analogies are helpful in highlighting the idea of variation within repetition. This topic deserves extensive treatment, but here I can discuss only one radical type of variation within repetition: the insertion of a negation within a repeated phrase.

6 Negation

To delineate the connection between repetition and negation, let us, first of all, consider the following set of sentences found in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin: "'Life is good.' 'Life is not good.'" (1984: 183). According to Bakhtin, these sentences exemplify "two judgments" between which "there exists a specific logical relationship: one is the negation of the other" (1984: 183). Formally, one might add, "Life is not good" as an echo of "Life is good" involves the repetition of the first statement, but with the addition of a single element, the negator "not," indicating opposite polarity – thus, negation in this case is but repetition with reversal: it might be regarded as repetition's shadow twin. Importantly, Bakhtin comments, the relationship between the two sentences mentioned above is not dialogic because it is not "embodied," but as soon as "these two judgments are separated into two different *utterances* by two different subjects, then dialogic relationships do arise" (1984: 183, emphasis mine).

This condensed introduction to the dialogic quality of uttered negation suffices to offer a glimpse into the importance of this linguistic form in "Northern Lights," for the piece contains at least one case that closely resembles Bakhtin's textbook examples. This instance takes the form of a series of

6 A similar wish to ground Oluwale's individuality, and thereby restore his dignity, may lie behind the authorial figure's quintuple repetition of the Nigerian's precise address in Leeds, "209 Belle Vue Road" (2007: 181, 182, 183, 203, 218). This particular textual riff appears all the more important as Oluwale lost the room that he occupied in this house following his internment (218); later official records laconically list him as "NFA" – no fixed abode (2007: 199). These accumulated examples suggest that repetition is indeed put in the service of the "meticulous and compassionate attention" that the author "pays to individual lives" (Ledent 2011: 72).

sentences involving the idea of disappearance. When Oluwale is depicted as vanishing into the privacy of his room at 209 Belle Vue Road, disregarding the "young louts [...] eager to embrace trouble" that he encounters on his way home, the authorial voice states:

(5) [y]ou ignored them and pressed calmly on your way, although sometimes you were forced to flee in your suit and collar and tie, but being young and fit you were able to fly away from your enemies and go home to 209 Belle Vue Road and pass quickly up the stairs to your room. And then you disappeared, David. And then you just disappeared. (183)

Echoing the final words in this excerpt, the woman heading the Chapeltown Commonwealth Citizens Committee recounts the moment when she noticed that David went missing:

(6) And David just disappeared and that was that [...]. The word on the street was that one night, while walking home and minding his own business, David had been arrested and he had been sent to Armley jail. I thought okay, this is not good, but I suppose we'll see him when he comes out. But we never did. He just disappeared. (192)

At first sight, these references to Oluwale's disappearance in passages (5) and (6) – a morphological negation denoting his departure or removal – seem to constitute yet another riff such as those discussed in the preceding sections. However, this expectation is defeated when, in a historical fragment on the city of Leeds, the texts mentions that

(7) The disenfranchised of Leeds were refusing to go anywhere. They insisted on being heard, and they demanded that they be allowed to participate [in the success story of their town]. They would not disappear. Nobody disappears. People don't just disappear. (199)

Crucially, in excerpt (7), the introduction of the syntactic negations "not," "nobody," and "don't" within a repeated pattern that already contains a morphological negation adds up to a positive, forcing the reader to radically re-evaluate the notion of "disappearance": even when poor citizens and migrants (also notably described using the morphological negation "disenfranchised") are temporarily out of sight – hidden away in prisons, psychiatric hospitals and "filthy rooms" (218) – their inconvenient presence cannot be wished away. More importantly even, in this reconfigured scenario, the poor and migrant inhabitants of the

city are shown to have agency: just as the previously mentioned "disenfranchised of Leeds were *refusing* to go anywhere" (199, emphasis mine), so "the Jewish population of Leeds *refused* to move on" (214, emphasis mine).

Significantly, the verb "refuse" is "a semantically negative lexical item" (Jeffries 2010: 108–109) – it has, in other words, a similarly negative value to more easily spottable grammatical terms such as "not", "never," or "nobody." It is, then, highly significant that Oluwale too "*refused* to leave [his] city" (176, emphasis mine) despite the repeated abuse that he suffered at the hands of the police. More arresting still, this expression of refusal is emblematic of the countless negations with which the Nigerian man is associated in the text: "he wouldn't take any abuse" (206–207, repeated twice and a third time in the form "he'd never take any abuse," 207); "he wasn't going to leave his home" (219); "he was not another victim" (226); "[h]e wouldn't let anything go" (258); "Olu would never back down" (259); and, in the pregnant words lent to Oluwale by the woman from the Chapeltown Commonwealth Citizens Committee: "I won't disappear. I won't be invisible" (219). This series of examples, I argue, indicates that "Northern Lights" consistently – though obviously not exclusively – uses negation as an indicator of resistance against the society that precipitated Oluwale's tragic fate.

To develop this idea, one must bring into the discussion another key property of negation, namely that even if the device can be defined as "the recognition and linguistic realisation of absence" (Nahajec 2014: 113), this "absence is contingent on the possibility of presence (2014:114). The fact that "understanding negation is as much about presence as it is about absence" (Nahajec 2014: 112) takes on particular significance when considering an important element in the text: witnesses' repeated and emphatic denials that Oluwale was a heavy drinker. These observers unanimously state: "[he was] not much of a drinker" (183); "He wasn't really a drinker" (190); "David was never much of a drinker" (205); "David was not a major drinker" (206). These repeated denials imply that accusations of drunkenness have been levied against Oluwale; they further allude to the widely held belief that vagrants are alcoholics; and they possibly anticipate further indictments of the Nigerian man. A key element in this context is that the witnesses' denials signal that "negations not only project two perspectives," one positive and one negative, "but also often imply that the negated perspective is the more ordinary, reasonable and expectable and that to correct what the reader might otherwise expect, its absence is being reported" (Toolan 2009: 148). From a more general perspective, these negative statements in Phillips's text illustrate Bakhtin's idea, developed in his discussion of addressivity, that "any utterance [...] always responds [...] to others' utterances that precede it" and also "tak[es] into account possible responsive reactions" (Bakhtin 1986: 94). Thus, just like the instance of negation found in the opening lines of "Northern Lights" ("But not like life had beaten him down":

167), the declarations that assert Oluwale's usual state of soberness are shown to be part of a discursive network in which they compete with utterances that represent a seemingly more "expectable" but presumably factually incorrect state of affairs. Crucial here is that, in the real world, the utterances indicting Oluwale chronologically preceded the testimonies in his defence, yet in the text, these incriminating elements are found only at a *later* stage, when it is stated that one of the charges "that they [the police] habitually brought against David was that he had been drunk" (206) and that "the other dossers generally were drinkers, [...] but not David" (243). In this sense, negation plays a decisive role in the narrative strategy of "Northern Lights" for, by allowing witnesses to deny an unspoken version of "reality" that hovers over their statements even before this reality is explicitly identified, the text first and foremost foregrounds resistance at the expense of the attacks that dominated the official narrative of Oluwale's life. Through this strategy, the narrative effects what might be termed a form of "dialogism in reverse": rather than following the (chrono)logical order of events – presenting accusations against Oluwale, and then elements in his defence, which would have been the expected order in "normal trial procedure," as Leif Dahlberg notices in his analysis of "Northern Lights" (2017: 336) – the text gives the initial position in the dialogue to the Nigerian man's supporters, who testify in favour of a "truth" that later indictments are then at pains to rebut. Additionally, these testimonies in favour of Oluwale work as veiled accusations against the police force and the medical staff who declared him to be violent and unstable.

In this perspective, it is important to note that this dialogic strategy is not only effective because of the order in which the testimonies of Oluwale's advocates and tormentors are presented, but also because the ideas they contain are subject to different interpretations by the opposing parties. Whereas witnesses from both sides agree that "verbally [Oluwale] could be very abusive, especially against the police" (191), his friends insist that this behaviour was a reaction to racist provocations, and that he was not a violent man: "He could be very foul-mouthed, but he wasn't a troublemaker"; "He wasn't crazy" (191). Antagonists, on the other hand, not only conceal the events that provoked Oluwale's hostile "use of four-letter words" (235), but they also appear to subscribe to a fallacious deductive reasoning according to which Oluwale was verbally abusive, hence violent and mad. Ultimately, this discrepancy in reasoning between supporters and antagonists leads to two radically different presentations of events: one in which Oluwale was "highly intelligent. Not crazy at all" (171), but was deemed mad because of his verbal resistance to the racist police and was then "deliberately made [...] 'slow'" (207) by the drugs administered to him in the psychiatric hospital; another in which he "was a 'dullard'" (224) who could be "aggressive, noisy, violent, and disturbed" (234), and therefore needed to be sectioned and medicated.

Interestingly, the focus on negation and on the dialogic echoes it fosters soon allows us to establish that contradictory points of view are expressed in the text using forms of opposition beyond that of positive vs. negative polarity. For instance, contradictory pieces of information are scattered through the text using antonyms: Oluwale is described as "slim" by the woman from the anti-racist committee (186), but "stocky-like" by a Nigerian friend (190) and "chunky" by former Inspector Ellerker (235). These particular discrepancies are also noted by Farrar (2018: 241), a fact that leads him to question the reliability of certain witnesses; but, from a literary perspective, these divergences are part and parcel of the text's dialogic strategy. Indeed, such contradictions seem to underscore unresolved and possibly unresolvable aspects of Oluwale' story; the reader, in other words, is purposely left with pieces of a puzzle that do not quite fit. This hypothesis is confirmed by the presence of a number of other perplexing elements. For example, it is said that Oluwale "wasn't a practising Christian" (225), yet among his possessions upon his last discharge from prison are "one hymn book, [...] one rosary" (240), the latter resurfacing in the form of a "Blue bead necklace with a crucifix on" (246) in the report of the police constable who searches David's pockets after his body is found in the River Aire. Even the "big black coat" that Oluwale was so insistently said to be wearing during his final days morphs into a "green check single-breasted overcoat" (240) on the man's final discharge, a week before his death. Such discrepancies, it must be noted, are highly unlikely to be the result of an editorial oversight, considering the meticulousness with which Phillips edits his texts (see, e. g., Ledent 2009: 190–191). I would rather suggest that the text *deliberately* undermines its own factual foundations, making it impossible for readers to close their dialogic relationship with the text. This, in turn, suggests that although the implied author strives to base many elements of the Oluwale narrative on facts, notably by having witnesses testify about the police harassment to which the Nigerian man was subjected, the impulse behind "Northern Lights" can only fully be appreciated and understood by taking into account its emotional, poetic, and dialogic qualities – a fact intuited by the reviewers cited at the beginning of this article, who called this section of *Foreigners* "haunting," "riveting," and "stylistically complex."

7 Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to elucidate how "Northern Lights" makes use of devices such as repetition and negation to intimate various ways of remembering David Oluwale. By way of a final instance, consider how the authorial figure

represents Oluwale's last moments before his disappearance into the River Aire. The narrator addresses the Nigerian man again, iterating the same clause three times in the space of a single page: "You did not jump, David. [...] You did not jump. [...] You did not jump" (257). The repetition of this declarative clause, devoid of modality, presents as fact the idea that Oluwale did not purposely kill himself by entering the river. The text does not affirm that the Nigerian man was pushed (or made to fall) by the two police officers who pursued him through the streets of Leeds, "their hot, desperate breath on the back of [Oluwale's] neck" (256); nonetheless, the repetition of "You did not jump" strongly implies such an accusation. Equally meaningful in this repeated clause is the occurrence of negation, which appears to work in two strategic, perhaps discordant, ways. On the one hand, as in the other cases of negation examined in this article, the use of "not" can be considered part of a resistance strategy that exposes the hypocrisy of the official, legally sanctioned version of events. Indeed, at the conclusion of the trial over the death of David Oluwale, even if Sergeant Kitching and Inspector Ellerker were declared guilty of assault in relation to previous incidents involving the Nigerian man, the more decisive "manslaughter charge" was "dismissed" because "there were no witnesses [...] and therefore [there was] no evidence" (248). This outcome may conform to the letter of the law but, by mentioning with insistence that Oluwale "did not jump," the text suggests that this verdict is not in keeping with what really went on. On the other hand, besides embodying this resistance strategy, the clause "You did not jump" paradoxically summons the spectre of the negated scenario, a version in which Oluwale *did* jump. The impossibility of discussing the Nigerian's death without alluding to a presumptive suicide intimates that his final moments cannot be evoked without acknowledging the existence of the story spun by the two white policemen. This tale, no matter how fanciful, was implicitly endorsed by the court in its refusal to convict the officers for their involvement in Oluwale's demise. Therefore, Ellerker and Kitching's version of events continues to haunt even those narratives that seek to publicly denounce the policemen's heinous crime.

This struggle between the official version of events and the alternative story put forward by "Northern Lights" continues almost to the end of the text. For instance, the powerful words addressed by the narrator to David, "you did not fail" (that is, you managed to claim your space in the city, 256) are simultaneously marked by dignified resistance and by the phantom of the defeat that these terms are attempting to erase. Considering this ambivalence, it is perhaps significant that, in the story's moving final lines, the narrator chooses to use positive polarity (along with the conceptual metaphor GOOD IS UP, which associates height with success) to claim a definitive victory over the racial

persecution that marked Oluwale's life. Looking at the mass grave in which the Nigerian man is buried in Killingbeck Cemetery, "at the crest of a hill" (259), the narrator triumphantly declares: "You have achieved a summit, David. Climbed to the top of a hill, and from here you can look down. You are still in Leeds. Forever in Leeds" (260). In view of the narrative strategy deployed in "Northern Lights," it is meaningful that Oluwale's final accomplishment should find expression in an apostrophic passage. Indeed, the Nigerian man's victory is thereby actualized through the narrator's longing for "reconciliation" with his addressee (Culler 2001: 158) – an "act of will" (2001: 158) that permeates the narrative, and which lends Phillips's textual memorial its force as a "poetic event." In this sense, the climactic ending can be said to celebrate not only the figure of David Oluwale, but also, momentously, the power of the imagination.

While this article has primarily focused on elucidating some of the stylistic strategies found in "Northern Lights," it is also hoped that the above reflections have opened up methodological avenues of research into the co-occurrence of repetition and negation in literary texts. One obvious line of enquiry could be pursued by performing corpus analyses of texts that make prominent use of both devices – such a project would allow for a more systematic examination of the contexts of co-occurrence than could be performed in this exploratory study. Further investigations might also establish whether the concurrent use of negation and repetition in literary narratives has similar effects to those evoked here, or whether contextual variables inevitably lead to specific pragmatic interpretations. Moreover, scholars might circumscribe with more precision the stylistic ramifications of what unites negation and repetition on a formal linguistic level, namely that the explicit negation of an existing utterance involves the repetition of at least part of the original statement. The many questions that remain unanswered at this stage suggest that a considerable amount of work needs to be done before a fully-fledged "poetics" of repetition and negation can be formulated. This article, however, hopefully constitutes a beginning.

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