

Poetic Repetition in *Paterson*

KATALIN SZLUKOVÉNYI

DOI: 10.53720/RPTA7795

Abstract: *Paterson* is a poem and a film about a man and a town, both called *Paterson*. Jim Jarmusch's adaptation is a contemporary tribute not only to William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*'s author and a prominent figure of American modernity, but to the poetry of everyday life. Focusing on the repetition and transformation of scenes and gestures of daily routine as well as of characters, this analysis traces how poetry is adapted to the media of film, slowly revealing the beauty of ordinary existence, an essential theme in the work of Williams. Besides, questions of identity in the context of tradition are also discussed examining twins, a salient example of repetition in Jarmusch's film.

Jim Jarmusch's *Paterson* seems to offer a plausible answer to the universal question about the meaning of life. The answer might not be easily accessible or widely popular—*Paterson* is far from being a blockbuster—still, it is consistent, full-fledged, and lucid, although presented in a complex way. Besides, it is very much in harmony with the legacy of William Carlos Williams, whose great epic, *Paterson*, serves as the basis of Jarmusch's film. Approaching the film from the perspective of its literary inspiration and focusing on the highly and deliberately prominent motif of repetitions, this paper attempts to decipher this answer and to follow its transformations through the film.

Repetitions and doublings already play a prominent role in Williams's book. The title, *Paterson*, recurs in the text repeatedly with a double denotation, referring both to the protagonist and the city where he lives, as the very first two occurrences of the name indicate. The final words of the "Preface" are: "to man, / to *Paterson*" (17), whereas the first part of Book 1, "The Delineament of the Giants," starts with the line: "*Paterson* lies in the valley under the Passaic falls" (18). The essential

and intricate relationship between the individual and locality is a central theme of *Paterson*, often discussed by critics; Margaret Glynne Lloyd, for instance, devotes an entire chapter to “The Man/City” in her essential monograph, *William Carlos Williams’s Paterson: A Critical Reappraisal*.

Repetitions, doublings, and mirrorings, however, also point toward the question of unity versus multiplicity. Williams calls the reader’s attention to this issue already in the first section of *Paterson*:

A man like a city and a woman like a flower
 —who are in love. Two women. Three women.
 Innumerable women, each like a flower.

But

only one man—like a city. (19)

This often-quoted passage from *Paterson* highlights unity, the essential belonging together of a human being and his habitat, not only by repeating the phrase: “A man—like a city” but also by emphasising the determiner in the second occurrence of the phrase: “only one man—like a city.” Yet, between the two occurrences of emphasised unity—which act like a poetic frame highlighting the encapsulated idea—multiplicity unfolds. On the one hand, man is defined on the basis of his relationships, both by being compared to the city and by being juxtaposed against the woman with whom they “are in love.” Thus, these lines may remind the reader of an epistemological axiom central to structuralist thought since Ferdinand de Saussure; namely that to define any single element and to grasp its meaning, one needs to place it in the context of other elements. In other words, no unit can ever be understood on its own but only as part of a system that involves multiplicity. On the other hand, the woman in the quotation rapidly proliferates, evoking the image of not only numerous romantic relationships but possibly also their natural consequence, which is reproduction. By the end of the passage, where Williams returns to the concept of unity, the dynamic tension between unity and multiplicity is clearly drawn.

In Jarmusch’s film, repetitions are not only frequent but become a leitmotif. The opening image shows Paterson with his wife, Laura—“who are in love”

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(Williams, *Paterson* 19)—curled up in bed in a shape slightly reminiscent of a heart, and as the camera moves all over their room, numerous objects related to the leitmotif appear. On the nightstand, there is a glass of water, bearing a pattern of two identical circles (0:01:17). On a shelf, there are some knick-knacks, including two toy buses, a larger grey one and a smaller blue one on top of each other (0:01:38), which might playfully recall the image of sexual intimacy displayed just half a minute earlier. Then, one can see some family photos: a young Paterson in military uniform, two portraits of a couple in black and white, presumably his parents, and a dog (0:01:42). These carefully selected items show a great variety within the theme of repetition from simple, automatic duplication (pattern printed on the glass) through significant similarity with minor differences (toy buses) to people being connected in time by reproduction (family photos). The importance of the leitmotif is confirmed by the very first sentences of the film too, when right after waking up, Laura says: “I had a beautiful dream. We had two children. Twins” (0:01:51–0:02:00).

Accordingly, twins are the most spectacular manifestations of repetition in the film. While walking to work, Paterson says hello to the first pair of twins he meets: two middle-aged, white men in identical clothes sitting on a bench (0:04:30). In the evening, his acquaintance, Sam, a young black man, introduces him to his twin brother, Dave (0:14:12), with whom they are playing pool in a bar. From the bus that he is driving, Paterson notices a black woman crossing the street with her two similarly dressed little daughters (0:37:39). Later, he has two white, blond, teenager passengers, who also wear identical pink dresses and the same hairstyle (0:48:57). He engages in conversation with a young white girl with dark hair waiting for her family, and upon their arrival, his companion points at them: “That’s my sister. We’re twins” (0:57:12). Driving the bus again, he listens to the chatting of two grey-haired, elderly ladies, both wearing claret track suits (1:12:50). This huge variety of twins serves multiple purposes. First of all, they grab the attention simply due to the emphatic effect of repetition. One passes by a myriad of people every day; however, if the same face is seen twice next to each other—as in the case of twins appearing together—it immediately stands out from the crowd, just as one starts to pay more attention to a phenomenon that recurs over time. Thus, after the first few pairs of twins, the viewer of Jarmusch’s film is looking forward to the next pair and is pleasantly surprised every time, because no two occurrences are the same. Each pair of twins is different, not only regarding their external traits (age, gender, skin and hair colour, clothes, or posture) but also the situation in which they

appear (work, leisure time, transportation) or what they do (sit, walk, play, talk), and in respect of their relationship with the protagonist (friends, casual acquaintances, total strangers) or with each other (same or different clothes and hairstyle, various types of interaction). Moreover, the theme of twins appears not only visually but sometimes verbally. As a result, one starts to recognise a pattern formed by the repetitions and instinctively seeks a symbolic meaning in it while also appreciating the differences between individual occurrences of the elements in the pattern, becoming more and more sensitive to nuances with each additional twin.

Jarmusch's intricate use of doublings and repetitions may remind the viewer of the mechanisms of poetry, in which repetition is an essential organising principle from the regularities of rhythm and rhyme to structures based on recurring or unfolding images. The increased intensity of sensory impressions, diminutive details that require careful attention, the importance of repetition in structure, meaning communicated through patterns and symbolic motifs rather than action or characters, a perception that is skilfully slowed down and provoked to proceed not in a linear way but to return repeatedly to former elements in order to integrate them into patterns that promise symbolic meanings—these are all features that tend to distinguish lyrical poetry from the narrative genres and also features characteristic of Jarmusch's *Paterson*.

As twins are the most spectacular manifestations of these repetitions, the question arises what they might stand for. As in the case of any good poem—or film employing poetic devices—the leitmotif or the central symbol cannot be translated into a simple “statement of its meaning” (181), as Cleanth Brooks warns in his classic essay, “The Heresy of Paraphrase”; yet, the semantic fields related to it can be mapped. In Jarmusch's film, twins undoubtedly make one aware of the question of identity, which is a central theme in Williams's *oeuvre* and especially in *Paterson*, an epic in which Williams creates “a provisional sense of an emerging ‘American identity’” (White 20). Even identical twins are not completely identical, of course—but what are the differences between them, and what do they have in common? This latter question pertains to community as well: what holds different people together as a group? In other words, how is a person essentially connected to other people in the same family, city, or nation? The former question, in contrast, addresses the issue of individuality: how can one preserve one's uniqueness in the middle of a modern society characterised by automation, mass production, public transportation, and the monotony of everyday routine? Thus, the leitmotif of twins triggers

a series of acutely current questions regarding the relationship between the individual and the community in a modern society.

Modern society is an important subject both for Williams and for Jarmusch. From the publication of Williams's *Complete Collected Poems* in 1938, critics "praised its empathy for and acute perceptions of everyday people and life" (Cohen 77); and it is "common to view Williams's work ... for its speech-based embrace of the so-called 'American idiom'" (Forrest 66). In harmony with Williams's poetic approach, Jarmusch also explores the beauty of everyday life and speech in many of his films, from his minimalist masterpiece, *Stranger than Paradise* (1983), through the repetitive ritual of *Coffee and Cigarettes* (1986) to *Paterson* (2016).

In his discussion of cinema which "broke free from the iron nucleus of narrative" (25), Paul Schrader suggests three possible "anti-narrative directions" (25): "The Surveillance Camera," which focuses on "quotidian, day-to-day reality" (25), "The Art Gallery," which "escapes the nuclear glue of narrative" by moving "toward pure imagery: light and colour" (28), and "The Mandala," which Schrader understands as some sort of "meditative cinema" (30). Visualising this idea in a circular diagram and positioning notable film directors in one of the three segments of the circle, he places Jarmusch close to the nucleus, between "The Art Gallery" and "The Mandala" (32). I would argue, however, that in *Paterson*, Jarmusch moves much closer to the strategy of "The Surveillance Camera" as he systematically records "quotidian, day-to-day reality" (Schrader 25), reminiscent of Schrader's definition.

In his adaptation of Williams's work, his protagonist Paterson is a bus driver, whose life is represented as the embodiment of urban monotony. The film consists of seven parts, each bearing the title of a day in the week, guiding the viewer from Monday morning to the next Monday through a series of shockingly repetitive daily routines. In each part, Paterson wakes up next to his wife, Laura, eats breakfast, and walks to work. While driving his bus No. 23, he observes his surroundings and listens to the passengers' conversations, integrating his experiences into poems that he usually records in his notebook next morning, right before starting his shift. After work, he returns home, sets the awry mailbox in front of his house right, and eats dinner with Laura. And in the evening, he walks his dog Marvin to a local bar where he has a beer with the bartender, Doc, and some other regulars. One workday can be summed up precisely like the other, which is emphasised by the fact that his job is to drive the same bus along the same route every single day. Yet no two days are precisely the same. The people around Paterson constantly change; Laura

waits for him every day with a different dinner and a different artistic surprise; and Paterson himself also proceeds with his poems, day by day.

Just as Williams was a master of revealing poetic beauty hidden in ordinary life, Jarmusch also succeeds in directing the viewer's attention to the immense beauty of familiar details. Watching Paterson walk and drive in the same streets again and again, one starts to notice the minor differences: the changing lights, the individual faces, and the stories they share. It seems as if it were exactly the monotony of the protagonist's work that allows him—and, through his focalisation, us viewers—to appreciate the details and discover their aesthetic depth and wealth.

Significance emerging through repetition and difference is an essential feature of Jarmusch's film. This feature is present in the leitmotif of twins, but it is far from being exclusive to it. It is not only daily habits that are repeated but practically everything: from characteristic sites like the bus yard to experiences visualised on screen and, then, verbally recorded in Paterson's poems. At least since *Modern Times* by Charlie Chaplin, it is common to conceive of repetitive acts as mechanical and dehumanising, but in *Paterson*, they become meaningful precisely due to iteration. Waking up next to the same woman every morning suggests intimacy. Driving a bus according to a reliable schedule allows people to commute, connecting distant parts of the city and thus contributing to the creation of an urban community. Having a beer with the same friends every night creates a warm atmosphere. Most of all: reproducing reality in poetry reveals the secret beauty of the ordinary world. As Williams puts it in his composition, "Spring and All," the mission of the artist is based on "things with which he is familiar, simple things—at the same time to detach them from ordinary experience to the imagination" (197).

The transformation of ordinary phenomena into art is a major theme of Jarmusch's *Paterson*. Not only does the protagonist write poems, but most of the other characters also pursue some artistic activity. Beyond fulfilling her duties as a housewife, Laura keeps herself busy decorating their home in black and white, learning to play the guitar, and baking beautifully ornamented cupcakes for the local fair. The bartender, Doc, keeps a "Wall of Fame"—reminiscent of Williams's intense use of local history in *Paterson*, including "THE GRRRREAT HISTORY of that old time Jersey patriot, N. F. Paterson" (30)—featuring photos, newspaper cut-outs, and other relics in memory of local celebrities, managing his collection with the care and pride of a museum curator. Paterson comes across a number of other people producing poetry too, from the young man who is practising slam poetry while waiting

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for his laundry (from 0:55:40) through the teenager girl who shows her poem to him (from 0:55:40) to the Japanese poet (from 01:43:47), an admirer of Williams himself.

In that sense, it could be argued that Jarmusch's film is not so much an adaptation of Williams' particular book, *Paterson*—which would be difficult to adapt anyway, since it lacks such basic constituents as actual characters or a plot—but rather a tribute to his entire *oeuvre* by attempting to reproduce his artistic strategy in a different medium. This also sounds reasonable if one considers that Williams's work is part of the film's world: a copy of *Paterson* appears on Paterson's desk (0:24:22), he reads one of Williams's best-known poems, "This Is Just to Say," to Laura (1:27:23), and the poet's portrait hangs on the wall of the protagonist's study (0:24:26). Thus, the film *Paterson* does not even pretend to be another artistic manifestation of the same fictive reality that the book *Paterson* represents; in narrative terms, it is not a new *syuzhet* (plot) of the same *fabula* (story), as defined by Viktor Skhlovsky. It is an independent fiction openly asserting to be aware of its predecessor and building not simply on the same tenets the poet articulated but borrowing numerous elements—poetic procedures, themes, specific quotations—from William's *oeuvre* as well.

Jarmusch's approach can be viewed as a tribute not only to Williams's poetic legacy but to the movement of Imagism as well, of which Williams was a part at the beginning of his career. As Ezra Pound phrased it in the opening statement of his manifesto, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste": "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (200). Accordingly, Jarmusch's film is not so much a visual narrative—although in the final twenty minutes, it turns out to have had a plot carefully but almost unnoticeably built up through the entire film, which provokes crucial questions about the significance of poetry—but rather a series of images, each of which is to be contemplated as a momentary "intellectual and emotional complex" (Pound 200). Similarly, Paterson himself follows the same practice in the film by recording some of these instants in his poems, in the true spirit of an Imagist poet.

This visual repetition and juxtaposition, which may invite spectators to explore the symbolic depth of individual images instead of rushing them through the film with the urge of a narrative, is a frequent feature in arthouse films. As Sarah Keller convincingly argues in her paper, "As Regarding Rhythm: Rhythm in Modern Poetry and Cinema," this kind of "pure cinema," which makes use of "the artistic and expressive capacities uniquely available to the medium that lie outside the zone of narrative concerns" was in fruitful interaction with Modernist poetry from

the beginnings—involving artists from both fields challenging and inspiring each other—although it was quickly overcome by “the eventual hegemony of the narrative integration” (130). Yet, she continues, “some of the most persistent theories of cinema have drawn upon models relative to poetry rather than narrative” (133). Based on her list of relevant film directors and theorists from the early twentieth century up to contemporary artists like Peter Greenaway, the intensely metaphoric use of visual language has remained a dominant trend in art film. In adaptations of literary works, however, it appears rarely, and even if it does—like in Sally Potter’s *Orlando* (1992), a film version Woolf’s novel—it still tends to remain subsidiary to the narrative. Jarmusch, however, organises his *Paterson* not on the basis of a chain of actions but on a delicately balanced structure of recurring images gradually achieving symbolic significance through repetition and contemplative reflection, which often takes the form of artistic representation within the world of the film. In that sense, his achievement of not only choosing a poetic work for adaptation but also maintaining its dominantly poetic mode of representation in the medium of the film is even more exceptional.

It is tempting to say that in the world of the film *Paterson*, the meaning of life is art, quite in the spirit of William Carlos Williams. Meaning starts to shine through the monotonous reality of Paterson’s life as he is meticulously transforming it into poetry. Everyday objects gain significance as their symbolic dimensions are discovered and recorded. Life becomes meaningful only because meaning is attributed to it by poetry, which can be understood as a metonym for art in general. But that would be a misleading interpretation, as it would suggest that reality in itself is dull and that its meaning is to be sought on a different level: on the transcendental level of art.

Williams’s probably most famous dictum, however, says the opposite: “no ideas but in things” (*Paterson* 18). In other words, art is not external to reality; art is implied in reality. Accordingly, Jarmusch destabilises the mimetic order or any other hierarchy between reality and representation in multiple ways. For example, the film shows the photo of Paterson’s pet before the actual dog is introduced: representation precedes reality. Besides, everyday experiences are often interpreted in terms of literature, for instance, when the drama of a couple in the bar is described as the local Romeo and Juliet (1:03:24). Moreover, fact is freely mixed with fiction. One learns from Doc’s “Wall of Fame” that the musicians, Dave Prater and Jimmy Vivino, as well as the actor, Lou Costello, were born in Paterson; but later the Japanese

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poet claims that Williams Carlos Williams “lived and make [sic] his poems here in Paterson, New Jersey” (1:48:00). This is biographically untrue—Williams spent his life in Rutherford—but it is not a straightforward lie either, since Paterson is not just an actual place but a metaphorical hometown as well, and in that sense, it can be said that Williams—mentally—lived in it.

The most complex example of the simultaneous co-existence of reality and fiction is probably a visual reference to Allen Ginsberg. He is relevant to the film partly as he was mentored by Williams (Doyle 143), partly because he grew up in Paterson, so his photo rightfully hangs on the “Wall of Fame” too (0:31:32), and his name is also mentioned by the Japanese poet (1:48:14). Whenever Paterson walks to the bar in the evenings, he passes by a shop window displaying a very spectacular, key-shaped, red neon sign (0:13:11), which is easily understood as the physical manifestation of the most often cited line from Ginsberg’s “Kaddish,” his mother’s final message: “The key is in the window” (31). Jarmusch’s gesture of transforming the abstraction, the verbal key, into a neon sign and transferring it to the strikingly material environment of a shop window is playfully deconstructive in several respects. On the one hand, it looks like an argument supporting Oscar Wilde’s ironic claim that “Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life” (21). On the other hand, both the maternal message and the bright advertisement are powerful, brief signs demanding attention, yet with a strong tension between the mundane, gaudy neon key and the desperate spiritual guidance of a suicide’s farewell note to his son. Finally, allusions are usually poetic devices offering a deeper understanding; yet, the meaning of the message—the key to the meaning of life—remains just as enigmatic in Jarmusch’s film as it was in Ginsberg’s poem.

As the examples above illustrate, meaning is not to be sought on a level superior to reality in Jarmusch’s *Paterson*. Phenomena become meaningful in the film because they are not single and isolated but either repeated or connected, or (mostly) both. “We have plenty of matches in our house” (0:04:08), starts Paterson’s first poem reflecting on a simple box of matches he was fiddling with during breakfast, and by the end of the poem, the ambiguity of the word “matches”—thin wooden sticks to light a fire versus correspondences—is fully developed. “Matches” become important because they mean more than just themselves; they resonate on more than one level: both the material and the poetic, symbolising the spark of actual fire and of creativity as well as pointing to the physical and the abstract at the same time. As Elemér Hankiss explains, “an essential feature in the poetic representation

of reality is shifting between levels and a vibration between various layers of consciousness” (22, my translation). Hankiss’s explanation is, of course, an elaboration of Empson’s thesis that “the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry” (3). I prefer using Hankiss’s version, though, because he explicitly refers to the process going on in the reader’s mind, which resonates with the dramatisation of the poetic process taking place in Jarmusch’s film.

In Jarmusch’s *Paterson*, life becomes meaningful through poetry—and poetry becomes meaningful through life. Paterson’s life is not hopelessly boring, because he is able to reproduce it on another level by distilling poetry out of it. However, he is able to keep writing poems, because his one-person audience, his wife, sincerely appreciates his texts. So, poetry is not represented by Jarmusch as a self-sufficient achievement, as *l’art pour l’art*, but as something that becomes meaningful only as part of real-life communication within the fictive universe of the film. That pertains to all the other characters as well: none of them are professional artists but every one of them has people who find their artistic output valuable, from the customers buying unique cupcakes to the regulars at the bar who notice whenever a new portrait appears on the “Wall of Fame.” Thus, significance is gained by phenomena repeated, and often repeated on both the level of life and of art; while repetitions and ambiguities all contribute to the unity that can only be experienced in meaningful communities. Apparently, Jarmusch draws a full circle from the single unit of the individual through repetition and multiplicity to the single unit of the community, very much in the spirit of William Carlos Williams. In Williams’s words in “Spring and All”: “In the imagination, we are from henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one. Whenever I say ‘I,’ I mean also ‘you.’ And so, together, as one, we shall begin” (178).

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KATALIN SZLUKOVÉNYI

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Katalin Szlukovényi is senior lecturer at the Department of English Studies of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. She received her PhD in English and American Literature in 2014. The title of her dissertation was *Irony, Self-Irony and Humour in Twentieth-Century Jewish American Literature*; its Hungarian book version, *Kétkedők: Irónia, önirónia és humor a huszadik századi zsidó amerikai prózában*, was published in 2017. Apart from her academic career, she also works as a poet, editor, and literary translator. Her latest collection of poetry is *Álomkonyha* (2020, Jelenkor).