
Kierkegaard's Repetitions: *A Rhetorical Reading of Søren Kierkegaard's Concept of Repetition*

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The novel *Repetition (Gjentagelsen)* from 1843 appears on first sight to be one of Søren Kierkegaard's innumerable engagement stories: a young man falls in love with an innocent young girl but is unable to consummate the love because poetic stirrings arise within him. Here the elderly cynic Constantin Constantius interferes and begins his speculative experiments with the young man, experiments meant to investigate whether the repetition – of the relationship to the girl – is possible. It proves not to be so, and the young man must flee to Sweden on the sly. When the girl, back in Copenhagen, then marries someone else, the young man suddenly becomes a real poet, triumphantly interpreting his loss as the ultimate success of the repetition for himself. Whether this is really true, as he says, naturally depends on what repetition is, but it is precisely here that the reader of Kierkegaard encounters problems.

The concept of repetition, like most of Kierkegaard's important concepts, has a Janus face. On the one hand, repetition is a religious category of transcendence. On the other hand, it connotes the banal monotony of earthly life. That the reader often has difficulty with repetition is because Kierkegaard allows the concept to rotate so quickly that its right side and reverse side melt together into a kind of optical illusion. Seriousness and jest are combined in such a disturbing manner that one cannot tell what is what. Now Kierkegaard, despite his irony, repeatedly specifies exactly where in his work he wants to be taken seriously. In *The Concept of Anxiety (Begybet Angest)* the pseudonymous Vigilius Haufniensis can assert that the meaning of "repetition" in the novel *Repetition* is "concealed again by arraying the concept in the jest of an analogous conception" (*Kierkegaard's Writings*, translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton 1980 and after, IV p. 289). However, he is thereafter busy pointing out that the author of *Repetition* "has stated the whole matter very precisely on page 34" (*ibid.*).

Kierkegaard research has closely followed Kierkegaard's references to when he means what he says, and has achieved a relatively unambiguous and manageable grip on the concept of repetition. Nevertheless, dealing

with the concept demands that we be able to differentiate between repetition proper – what I will henceforth call *divine repetition* – and *mundane repetitions* which are mere frivolous copies and distorted repetitions of the divine repetition, and which must therefore be discarded.

This article will desist from a theological or existential use of the concept of repetition and instead follow a more textual treatment of this dualistic concept. We will thereby demonstrate that it is not simply difficult but impossible to purge repetition of its confusing rhetoric: that it is impossible to distinguish between literal and figurative meaning, between divine and mundane signification. What we can do is to try and elucidate the complicated rhetorical threads of the analysis, keeping an eye out for where they become knotted.

The Mundane Repetition

None of *Repetition's* two principle characters can get the language to work correctly, and both cite the mundane repetition as the villain. For the young man, the problems emanate from the ethical conflict in which, thanks to his sad engagement story, he finds himself. He experiences language as unconditionally loyal to the morality with which he has broken. The words can only be used to condemn the breaking of the engagement, but are of no use for formulating his own genuine but incommensurable interior. Nor can they explain how, in his own poetic way, he feels himself faithful to the girl:

If both of us are faithful, why then is this expressed in human language in such a way that she is faithful and I am a deceiver? (III p. 235).

In the context of his nameless but authentic stirrings, the young man makes a fool of the inauthentic human language which has frozen him out, and calls it “gossip and rumors about the righteousness of Government that are invented by human wisdom and spread by old women and fractional men” (III p. 233), a “wretched jargon . . . intelligible only to a clique” (III p. 235) and an “explanation at second hand” (III p. 244).

Language is inauthentic and unreliable because its essence is repetition (“rumors”, “second hand”). The young man understands how to use this insight into the essence of language to his advantage: “in order not to break off all communication” with people, he has compiled an anthology of quotations from classical literature and ordinary matter-of-fact common sense, from which he can quote clichés for any suitable occasion. Opposing this finite and repetitive human language, the young man places as correctives the words of God and Job. God’s thunder is “trustworthy, faithful, original” and in Job’s words “is pithy”, “it is born anew as something original” while being read (III p. 239). Because of these authentic words’ curative powers, the young man excerpts the Book of Job, but at the same time does not want to quote Job:

But quote him – that I cannot do. That would be wanting to put in my own pittance, wanting to make his words my own in the presence of another (III p. 238).

We see here a quite refined distinction: it is apparently legitimate to make excerpts, but not to quote. The difference must lay in control over the repetition. The dangerous aspect of the quotation is that for “another”, i.e., a third man, it can be ambiguous as to whom the words’ meaning are to be attributed – with the one being quoted or the one doing the quoting. This watering down of the meaning’s origin is only made worse because the third man could be considered as wanting to make himself into the first man and quote further. The copy made in solitude is otherwise controllable.

The elderly Constantin Constantius also has problems with the repetitive language. He depicts himself as a “police officer” a spy whose task is to uncover the emptiness behind the linguistic expressions. When artificial and “neatly turned phrases” are recited

Then one calmly puts one’s eye to the microscope, then one does not swallow everything one hears but closes the jealousy, the critic’s screen that tests every sound and every word (III p. 176).

Yet in spite of his sharp criticism of the recited and inauthentic language without genuine content, Constantin himself is also guilty of quoting. Constantin has evolved a “thief language” which permits him to use mundane repetitions to hide what he really means (III p. 186).

Common for both the dry Constantin and the poetically vigorous young man is that they can – in Kierkegaard’s terms – be classified as aesthetic and recollecting types. Recollection refers what is seen back to original experiences, just as in Plato’s remembering – or anamnesis – where knowing is described as a recognition of the general ideas from pre-existence. It is for this recollecting type that repetition becomes a problem: it pushes what is originally meaningful out of the signs.¹

Repetition and the Demonic

For *Repetition’s* two main characters, the mundane repetition concept can thus be said to cover three different but related problems. First, there is the impossibility of expressing a unique and original experience in a repetitive language of clichés (this was the young man’s problem). Second, there is the impossibility of recognizing with certainty a genuine meaning behind repetitive words (Constantin’s problem). Finally, there is the impossibility of protecting the meaning of words or sentences from the distorting repetitions of subsequent quotations (the young man’s problem on behalf of Job). All three mechanisms reduce the language-using subject’s free control over his own language, and thereby make repetition’s most essential features equivalent to that of the demonic; ac-

According to Kierkegaard's teachings about stages, the demonic is one of the most dangerous detours on the path of life.

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, the demonic appears as a rather comprehensive and loosely defined concept. The demonic is the inwardness which locks itself around a sorrow or a worry, regardless of how serious, and whose reservedness causes it to avoid communication with the environment. The demonic, however, has a form of contact with the environment, but it is done unfreely. The inwardness which has been blocked will not push the language out, but the point is that language pushes itself out.

Therefore, the pseudonymous Vigilius Haufniensis defines the demonic as "the sudden", the "enclosing reserve and the unfreely disclosed" (IV p. 391). And the metaphors for this Kierkegaardian slip, where the secret breaks out of a human being are "that appalling . . . ventriloquism" and the "involuntary telegraphy" (IV p. 396): metaphors which emphasize the unfree and mechanical nature of the phenomenon.

The similarities between the concepts of the demonic and the mundane repetition are thus based on a problematic communication between individual and environment. Communication either proceeds idly – both the demonic and mundane repetition can be defined as "the contentless, the boring" (IV p. 339), the meaninglessness of talk entailing the individual's isolation – or communication is unfree: the individual reveals something other than he wishes to communicate. An important difference between the demonic and repetition, however, is that in *The Concept of Anxiety* language is characterized as the organ of freedom which operates to save the muteness of reservedness. Conversely, in *Repetition* it is language itself which exhibits demonic features.

The connection between unruly language and the demonic becomes clearer in the later *Sickness to Death's* more accurate expression of the demonic. The demonic person represents an unruliness in the writing, which the writer cannot control.

Figuratively speaking, it is as if an error slipped into an author's writing and the error became conscious of itself as an error – perhaps it actually was not a mistake but in a much higher sense an essential part of the whole production – and now this error wants to mutiny against the author, out of hatred toward him, forbidding him to correct it and in maniacal defiance saying to him: No, I refuse to be erased; I will stand as a witness against you, a witness that you are a second-rate author (XI p. 185).

In this case the author is God and the slip of the pen represents the demonically despairing individual. In the following section we will see how the demonic operates when it is Constantin who is the author.

The Fleeting Nymph

Two of Constantin's scenes of recollection can serve as examples of his linguistic problems. The novel carefully points out that these two sequences belong together: both take place in Berlin; the first in a theater box, where one sits "nearly just as good as in one's own room"; the second in a lodging, from which the world appears as a stage setting. In Danish the words for lodging and a theater box (*logilloge*) sound very much alike. The recollection scene in the theater, besides being very famous, is also very complicated, and a full analysis cannot be rendered here. Yet the scene can help shed light on *how* language opposes Constantin's recollection project. In the following chapter the analysis of the scene in the lodging will then attempt to explain *why*.

In the theater, Constantin's recollections are not released by the comedy taking place on stage, but by the popular audience's convulsive laughter, which as a "nature sound in the gallery" (III p. 204), calls forth an image of a brook:

My unforgettable nursemaid, you fleeting nymph who lived in the brook that ran past my father's farm and always helpfully shared my childish games, even if you just took care of yourself! You, my faithful comforter, you who did not age as I grew older ... (III p. 205).

After this celebration of the nymph as a symbol for the lost time – which, incidentally, is a very early and nearly foster-like childhood – the nymph's attributes are distributed into a series of other objects of Constantin's desire. Her freshness, tranquility and innocence are first re-discovered in a young, untouched girl sitting in a box above that of Constantin. These properties later reappear in a memory image of another young girl in a garden, where Constantin has been spying as a kind of voyeur; then in an image of a refreshing bed; and finally, in a vision of a deathbed as fresh and inviting.

The yearning for purity which colours this series of images is at the same time a longing toward the unarticulated and blank. The nymph's voice is a speechless "soothing murmur", the girls being spied upon are silent. As for the deathbed:

The instant one's body is removed, [the deathbed] looks more inviting than if a solicitous mother had shaken and aired the covers so that the child might sleep more peacefully (III p. 206).

The ideal deathbed looks like a blackboard which has been washed clean of writing; hence, there must be no sign of life in the sheets. In a wider sense, this longing for purity and wiping away traces represents a dream of eliminating time. It is timelessness which is desired: the nymph never ages; the young girl across from him is not shown as being ready to marry, so her innocence remains chronic; and the deathbed is wished identical with a child's bed.

This desired abolition of time in fact takes place in Constantin's text in connection with the nymph. The celebration of the nymph is held in the past ("Nymph, who *lived* in the brook"), but at the end suddenly changes – and with great effects on beauty – to the present: "You fleeting life that *lives* in the brook running past my father's farm, where I *lie* stretched out as if my body were an abandoned stick" (ibid.). Now and then are melting together in a kind of eternal present, at the same time as Constantin melts together with the nymph as a bather in the brook. Time is abolished, and Constantin feels himself "rescued and released" (ibid.).

One can indeed choose to read the nymph image as a successful and idyllic recollection process, and indeed it is often read this way. Yet why the continuing, why the movement of the nymph's qualities from one object of desire to another? Immediately after melting together with the nymph, Constantin admits "and yet I lacked something" (ibid.), whereafter he eyes the girl across from him. But this lacking of something continues, for his desire is not satisfied with this virginal being, but continues to move quickly through the chain of associations.

Nor does this lacking gradually lessen as the continuation accelerates. Constantin's images take on an increasingly demonic character. From the nymph's innocent, childlike universe to the erotic – but nevertheless virtuous – interest for the girl across from him, further on into the most ambiguous voyeurism of the young girl in the garden, to a bitter longing for the deathbed. It is as if Constantin's yearning for origin becomes gradually more inflamed. Moreover, the distance to the desired objects also becomes greater. Constantin bathes *in* the nymph's brook, but he is separated from the first girl by the space of the theatre and from the second by a thicket and a high slope.

Constantin's description of the successful recollection process is thus countered by his own text. He dreams of rest and the reclining position, but the text continues its journey from image to image. He celebrates the object's unmediated presence, but ends in demonstrating its increasing distance. He postulates the liberating abolition of time, but his chain of associations concludes in a kind of longing for death.

The Berlin Lodging

The same linguistic problems appear in Constantin's second recollection sequence. The description of this Berlin "chambre double" begins otherwise meticulously:

One goes straight ahead, one finds oneself in an anteroom. Beyond are two entirely identical rooms, identically furnished, so that one sees the room double in the mirror. The inner room is tastefully illuminated . . . The first room is not illuminated. Here the pale light of the moon blends with the strong light from the inner room. One sits down in a chair by the window, one looks out on the great square, one sees the

shadows of passersby hurrying along the walls; everything is transformed into a stage setting. A dream world glimmers in the background of the soul (II p. 192).

This very elaborate description of the lodging achieves a figurative meaning – as an image of the relationship between understanding and reality – by alluding primarily to Plato. It is in fact the well known myth of the cave dwellers who draw the picture's basic plan and equip it with actors. The cave must nevertheless be rebuilt to make it habitable for the Kierkegaardian anthropology. First, there is with Constantin only one observer: the single individual. Second, there is an "inner room" which appears to be the mirror reflection of the outer room, and here Kierkegaard allows one of his favorite puns to split the psyche's space in two: perception in the front, reflection's mirror image in the back. Finally, the sources of light are placed somewhat different than in Plato, where light radiates from the truer world of ideas and into the shadow kingdom. In the Berlin lodging this light is transformed into a "pale light of the moon", associated with theater lights and unreality. In addition, there is an extra light placed in the inner room, which, in contrast, appears as "tasteful".

Seen from the observer's position – the chair by the window in the front room – the world is transformed into unreality and into a stage setting. Perception cannot, according to Constantin, convey any permanent and reliable meaning. Nevertheless, it makes possible the movement through the looking glass:

One has smoked one's cigar; one goes back to the inner room, one begins to work. It is past midnight. One extinguishes the candles and lights a little candle. Unmingled, the light of the moon is victorious. A single shadow appears even blacker, a single footstep takes a long time to disappear. The cloudless arch of heaven has a sad and pensive look as if the end of the world had already come and heaven, unperturbed, were occupied with itself (ibid.).

The inner room is the topos of recollection. Even though the two rooms are otherwise identically furnished, it is here where the easy chair is mentioned. In the novel, the easy chair functions as an emblem of recollection, thanks to an important scene on the first pages, where the young man expresses his rare problem – that he from the first day ruins his love by recollecting it – with a verse by the contemporary Danish poet Poul Møller: "Then, to my easy chair / Comes a dream from my youth" (III p. 177). From Constantin's easy chair it appears "as if the end of the world had already come", and this, too, is characteristic of recollection, which, as Constantin remarks elsewhere, is always melancholy because it "begins with the loss" (III p. 178).

The Recollection's Melancholy

The movement from the lodging's antechamber to its inner room is thus at the same time a movement from "the uneasy adventuriness of discovery" to "the sadness of recollection" (III p. 174). Such are formulated the two positions at the beginning of the book, and not surprisingly it is the recollection which Constantin evaluates as positive: the shadow which the recollection can provoke is clearer ("even darker"), and more permanent ("long time"); it is "single" in contrast to the confusion of shadows outside.

Reading the relationship between the shadow and the recollecting person which must have cast the shadow as a relation of signs, the text asserts that recollection's strategy makes possible a sign of greater clarity and motivation: the shadow is indeed a *symbol* for the absent person (whomever one could imagine that Constantin, a stickler for principles, wants to remember), and this symbol abolishes time in the recollection's melancholy eternity, just as the nymph did so above. However, the recollection's promising statement is contradicted by the text's own repetitions. The tropes are in fact themselves bound to that temporality they were meant to abolish. The lodging's figurative meaning is achieved, as noted, by playing on Plato's parable. That it at all concerns recollection is indicated by the easy chair, which derives its meaning from the scene depicted on the novel's first pages. The tropes are therefore not autonomous and organic symbols, but time-bound repetitions of previous signs.

The tropes' mundane repetitive character is also emphasized by some very conspicuous syntax figures. As with the previous recollection scene, the text is dominated by a violent repetition of the same sentence structure: "One climbs the stairs . . . one opens a little door, one stands in the entry", etc. More precisely, it is a matter of 18 anaphorical parallelisms of short main clauses, all of which begin with the word "one" (*man*) – a feature only partly visible in Lowrie's English translation and not at all visible in Howard and Edna Hong's. This rhythm gives the episode an unusually choppy character – using Constantin's words we might call it recitational – which emphasizes the text's metonymic pace from room to room in the literal description of the lodgings.

The reader thus ends in the aporetic situation that on the one hand the text is obviously meant to be read in its figurative meaning, while on the other hand it accentuates to an almost grotesque degree its own metonymic diction; hence, the literal meaning: the lodging as simply lodging. On the one hand the text asserts the abolition of time in the recollection's permanent and unique symbol. On the other hand, the caricaturizing demonstrates its own repetitions and thereby its own embeddedness within time. Constantin's statement of the reliable and persistent symbol thus becomes in a demonic way contradicted by the mundane repetitions in his own text. He cannot say what he wants, and the description of the Berlin lodgings is therefore followed by a comic

situation where Constantin is unable to express himself to his German host:

I wanted to congratulate him, but since I am not such a master of the German language that I know how to improvise in a pinch and did not have suitable idioms at hand for such an occasion, I limited myself to pantomimic motions (III p. 192).

Symbolic Language

Constantin's semiotic utopia of an authentic language breaks down in the two recollection scenes above. It was otherwise the same utopia of a transparent language which formed the basis for his interest in the young man:

His gait, his movement, his gestures – all were eloquent and he himself glowed with love. Just as a grape at the peak of its perfection becomes transparent and clear, the juice trickling from its delicate veins, just as the peel of a fruit breaks when the fruit is fully ripe, just so love broke forth almost visibly in his form (III p. 177).

In the young man's person there is an immediate connection between the internal (his falling in love) and the external (his gesture, etc.) and between the idea (love) and the concrete feelings. As sheer "eloquence", the young man thus becomes a sign with reliable correspondence – in the form of penetration – between signified and signifier. In other words, he becomes a symbolic object.

In his idealization of the symbol, Constantin places himself close to the pre-Romantic and especially Goethe's notions of the symbol as the great mediator between the particular and the universal, between language and reality, between subject and object. Constantin's text can be read as a long series of attempts to establish continuing and organic symbols which would give the Goethian penetration ("Durchdringung") to the object. Yet this not only goes wrong in the Berlin lodging. It fails each time the symbol must deliver authenticity. Once, however, the correspondence between subject and object appears to have succeeded for Constantin, producing a state of nearly absolute well-being:

I had a presentiment of every impression before it arrived and awakened within me. All existence seemed to have fallen in love with me, and everything quivered in fateful rapport with my being. Everything was prescient in me, and everything was enigmatically transfigured in my microcosmic bliss, which transfigured everything in itself (III p. 211).

Ironically, this belabored description of cosmic harmony – which depends greatly on the early Romantic neo-Platonic concepts of "pre-

sentiment” (*Ahnelse*), organism and microcosm – is punctured just as this well-being approaches its climax: “suddenly something began to irritate one of my eyes” (*ibid.*). Here the eye is the point of mediation which ensures correspondence between inner and outer, and when it begins to scratch, the connection is abruptly closed and the world again collapses into subject and object.

Allegory

On the basis of Goethe’s classic distinction between symbol and allegory, one could label the poetics practiced by Constantin’s text as allegorical.² As was seen in the analysis of the Berlin lodgings, it was no organic and completed symbol, but rather, a conscious and repeating play on prior meanings which produced the meaning of the text. This is why the air deflates from Constantin’s dream of the symbol’s transparent language. In opposition to the promise of the symbol’s eternal present, the allegory is bound to an unavoidable temporality, in that every sign is but the distorted quotation of prior signs. And in contrast to the symbol’s conciliation of subject and object, the allegory maintains distance.

However, the theory of allegory is not formulated in the novel. It is only a few years later in the authorship, in connection with the theory of indirect communication, that Kierkegaard attempts to formulate the experiences with this other way of writing. At the conclusion of *Stages on Life’s Way* (*Stadier paa Livets Vej*) from 1845, the pseudonymous author Frater Taciturnus comes forward and appears to be closely related to *Repetition*’s Constantin. It is a kinship of which Taciturnus himself is clearly conscious (VI p. 397). Like Constantin, Taciturnus is a “street inspector” (VI p. 424), who has created a young man and has involved him in a fictive engagement story. In Constantin’s case the project is subtitled “A Venture in Experimenting Psychology”. With Taciturnus it is simply an “experiment”. That which separates Taciturnus from Constantin is that the former is not restricted by a romantic symbolic poetics, but on the contrary, very consciously reflects on the kind of textual strategy involved in the concept of experiment. This strategy’s most important characteristic is its diametrical opposition to poetic language. In terms of a very traditional aesthetic, Taciturnus characterizes poetry with key words such as pathos, immediacy, visibility and “the commensuration of the outer and the inner” (VI p. 411). Whereas poetry is bound to the aesthetic sphere, the experiment can describe the hidden movements of inwardness because it has renounced poetry’s “commensuration”. In contrast to poetry’s passion, the experiment bears a sense of reflection and scientific disinterest: “The experiment always addresses the reader with the formal *De* (instead of the informal *du*, VI p. 415). While all outward meaning is coolly relinquished, the experiment produces its text as a “construction” (VI p. 424) from a set of categories:

Now, if only no one tempts me, perhaps promises me the moon and

the stars, the favour of young maidens and the applause of reviewers, but then demands an answer to the question whether my imaginary experiment is a real-life story, whether it is based on something real. Yes, certainly it is based on something real, namely, on the categories (VI p. 415).

In contrast to Constantin, who in an aesthetic way seeks in the external world an origin to meaning that the symbol can transport into the language, the consciously allegorical Taciturnus understands that the “base” (*Grund*) of meaning is to be found within language itself.

The Aesthetician Deconstructed

It is not Constantin's symbol-idealizing view of the world, but the cool, allegorical poetics which is supported by the basic architecture of Kierkegaard's philosophy. In fact, Kierkegaard persistently maintains the division between subject and object. Formulated in the metaphor of the Berlin lodging, it is not, as Constantin believes, a question of reconciling the square outside (outwardness) with the inner room (inwardness) by the aid of the symbol. Rather, it is a matter of maintaining the distance between outer and inner and of rejecting the external as theater-like glow, so that one can instead infinitely concentrate on the “inner room” in all its meaningfulness.³

By bringing Constantin's symbol-idealizing text to silence, one has indeed deconstructed the pseudonymous author's project, but not Kierkegaard's. Seen from the vantage point of the entire corpus of works, the function of a book like *Repetition* is precisely its own deconstruction. In other words, the result of our reading – if not its methods – accords excellently with the general plan for *Repetition* and more generally for all of Kierkegaard's aesthetic writings: the goal of Constantin's aesthetic-recollecting position is precisely to indicate its own inner contradictions and to dissolve itself into a linguistic fog. This is supposed to force the aesthetically fascinated reader into frontal collision with religious truths. In *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (*Synspunktet for min Forfattervirksomhed*) Kierkegaard formulates these general strategies as the reader, “with the momentum gained by devotion to the aesthetic . . . rushes headlong into contact with the religious” (XIII p. 533).

One could then lay down one's weapons here and admit that Kierkegaard has yet again forestalled his own deconstruction. In spite of all the reading's unfair intentions, the game of patience emerged along religious precepts. Divine repetition is not found in the writing that bears the stamp of the aesthetician's dialectical ambiguity, but only outside writing, in the pantomimically silent act.⁴

The Allegory of Religion

The foregoing study has shown how language's mundane repetitions thwart the project of recollection and, hence, the aesthetician's position.

The question remains as to how the religious repetition must be placed in this problematic. And how must one at all understand divine repetition? If one continues to hold to *Repetition*, two important directions can be marked out for a theory of the divine repetition. On the first page of the novel we encounter the divine repetition as a mirror reversed anamnesis.

Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward (III p. 173)

This is a strongly stylized opposition: recollection aims itself backwards toward the ideas in an easy chair type of passivity, while repetition actively moves itself forward in what is often metaphorized with the human gait; for example, as in the case of Diogenes at the beginning of the novel. This means that repetition becomes parallel with the allegory. The backward direction – common to both the recollection and the symbol – goes from real to ideal, from reality to language, or as Goethe terms it, from the particular to the universal. Conversely, the divine repetition and allegory share the forward-going pace from, respectively, the ideal to the real, and from language’s “base” to the reality. Or, as with Goethe on allegory, from the universal to the particular. Divine repetition and allegory thus share the forward-directed projection of meaning.

Another characterization of the religious repetition occurs when Constantin reflects over the young man’s possibility to recapture his otherwise squandered engagement. Here Constantin approaches the theology of the absurd in *Fear and Tremoring (Frygt og Bæven)*, which appeared on the same day as *Repetition*. Divine repetition becomes possible only when, thanks to a perfect extinction of every feeling, one has arrived at “the borders of the marvelous” (III p. 220) where the world no longer has meaning, and from which “the return” (Constantin here uses the words of Johannes de Silentius) can occur only by virtue of the absurd. In order for the young man to return to the girl, she must be emptied of all intrinsic meaning:

So once again the girl was not an actuality but a reflexion of motions within him and an incitement of them. The girl has enormous importance . . . but her importance lies not in herself but in her relation to him . . . She is the girl – period (III p. 220).

Return demands that the girl lose her reality and be turned into an empty and random female human being who has no meaning in and of herself, but who can function as a blank film screen for the projections of the meaningfulness of religious movements. Here divine repetition and allegory both seem to draw on the same linguistic experiences. They not only have in common the projection of meaning, but both face a world totally

devoid of meaning. Seen from the perspective of repetition, the girl is transformed into an empty allegorical object.

Divine Repetition and Mundane Repetition Once More

Allegorical poetics function as an effective strategy for Kierkegaard's project in *Repetition*, despite their not having been formulated. Instead, the text formulates fragments of a doctrine of divine repetition and fragments of a diagnosis of mundane repetition. Taken together, these fragments comprise two sides of a theory of allegory. Religious repetition contains experiences of the allegorist's relation to the contingent and meaningless world that he, from his vantage point of absolute subjectivity, freely and sovereignly can accord or deny meaning. However, as mundane repetition of prior meaning, allegory reveals the fact that the surmounted and disavowed finite instead devolves into language. It establishes itself as an unavoidable condition which demonically limits the subject's freedom towards, and control over, its own communication.

Since these two sides of allegory are intrinsically linked together, it is not possible to keep repetition's divine and mundane side so radically apart, as Kierkegaard's theology requires: religious repetition contains not only a silent insight, but also an insight into a linguistic position.

Kierkegaard's linguistic problems, and hence, his allegorical poetics, impose themselves between the divine and the mundane repetitions and cause the sharp distinction between silence and speech to wobble. In other words, it is not possible to cut off the repetition from its rhetoric in order to end up with a purified, genuine, and therefore useful concept of repetition. The rhetoric has implanted itself deep into the concept: the two modes of repetition are in fact already connected from the very beginning.

Translated by Steven Sampson

1. The sickness of the mundane repetition is not only diagnosed in *Repetition*. Early in 1843 *Either/Or* appeared, and already here the assessor had to defend marriage against the Aesthetician "A's" description of it as a "habit, the unavoidable habit, this dreadful monotony, the everlasting Einerlei [sameness]" (II p. 114). According to the aesthetician, the mundane matrimonial repetition profanes "the holy and visible signs of the erotic" (II p. 128).

Later in his authorship, the consciousness of the "wearing down" of language by repetitions comes to function as ammunition for Kierkegaard's social criticism. In *A Literary Review (En litterair Anmeldelse)*, from 1846, language is ac-

cused of being a derived and soulless mode of speech, as inauthentic as "the whisper of paper money" compared to the content's real value. This mechanics of repetitions ("representatives") makes language abstract and anonymous, so that in the end loving couples will use handbooks in order to talk "anonymously with each other" (VIII p. 98).

2. In *Maxims and Reflections*, Goethe comments on the difference between the allegory and the symbol, which is simultaneously the difference between Schiller and himself. Hence:

There is a big difference between the poet seeking the particular to the universal, and the poet seeing the universal in the particular. Of

the first type there arises allegory, where the particular counts only as an instance, as an example of the the universal; the latter, however, is the genuine nature of poetry” (vol. 9, p. 529, *Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gesprache*, , Zurich, 1949; my translation).

Here allegory is identified with Schiller’s sentimental view of the world as dead and devoid of meaning, in contrast to the naive view of the symbol, which sees things as ripe with meaning.

3. For the theologian Kierkegaard, the merging of subject and object is neither desirable nor possible, regardless of whether it occurs via the Goethian symbol or via the Hegelian system. In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, (*Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*), Kierkegaard accuses Hegel in the name of existence:

The systematic Idea is the identity of subject and object, the unity of thought and being. Existence, on the other hand, is their separation. It does not by any means follow that existence is thoughtless; but it has brought about, and brings about, a separation between subject and object, thought and being (VII p. 102).

4. According to Kierkegaard’s theology, language’s mundane repetition and religion’s divine

repetition mutually exclude each other. This is formulated especially clearly in the religious speeches *The Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air* (*Lilien paa Marken og Fuglen under Himlen*), which Kierkegaard published under his own name in 1849. Here the obedient silence of the lily and the bird is held up against the poet’s dialectical indefiniteness: “And this indefiniteness emerges precisely with man’s ambiguous advantage of being able to talk” (XI p. 20). It is thus not just poetic fancy but human speech as such which causes ambiguity. And the demonic ambiguity impedes, in the form of sin, genuine reverence to God. In order to achieve the correct relation to God, one must save oneself from the ambiguity of language and become “simple”. Only when this simplicity has been learned will it be possible to achieve the transcendence of repetition – here called “the instant” (*Øieblikket*):

O ye profound teachers of simplicity! But might it not also be possible when one speaks to hit upon ‘the instant’? No, only by keeping silent does one hit upon the instant; while one is talking, even though one says only a word, one misses the instant (XI p. 18).