

Radical Hermeneutics
Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project

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One

Repetition and Kinesis: Kierkegaard on the Foundering of Metaphysics

For Kierkegaard, the question is whether movement in the existential sense is possible, whether it is possible for the existing individual to make progress. Taking his point of departure from the Eleatic denial of motion, which is for him the paradigmatic gesture of philosophical speculation, Kierkegaard argues on behalf of existence and actuality. He takes his stand against philosophy and metaphysics, for which movement is always a scandal, and argues the case for existential movement. Thus, Constantin Constantius the immobilized one, the one suspended in Eleatic constancy raises this serious philosophical question in the most whimsical terms.

When the Eleatics denied motion, Diogenes, as everyone knows, came forward as an opponent. He literally did come forward, because he did not say a word but merely paced back and forth a few times, thereby assuming that he had sufficiently refuted them. When I was occupied for some time, at least on occasion, with the question of repetition whether or not it is possible, what importance it has, whether something gains or loses in being repeated I suddenly had the thought: You can, after all, take a trip to Berlin; you have been there once before, and now you can prove to yourself whether a repetition is possible and what importance it has. (SV III 173/R 131)

This hoary philosophical issue is thus to be posed in a farcical form, by way of the "jest of an analogous conception" (SV IV 290/CA 18n), by deciding whether Constantin can repeat his trip to Berlin. This is to be a parody of the real question, which is whether it is possible for the individual to move forward, to get off dead center and make existential progress. Repetition is an existential version of *kinesis*, the Aristotelian counterpoint to Eleaticism, a movement which occurs in the existing individual.

Kierkegaard thinks that philosophy metaphysics inevitably undermines movement. Philosophy, as Nietzsche says, is Egyptianism: "All that philosophers have handled for millennia has been conceptual mummies; nothing actual has escaped from their hands alive. . . . What *is*, does not *become*; what becomes, *is* not." ¹ Philosophy is scandalized by motion and thus tries either to

exclude movement outright from real being (Platonism) or, more subversively, to portray itself as a friend of movement and thus to lure it into the philosophical house of logical categories (Hegelianism). Kierkegaard objects to the mummifying work of philosophy, not because he thinks that eternity the sphere of that which lies outside of time and movement is an illusion, that the real world is a myth (*Fabel*), as does Nietzsche,² but because he thinks that philosophy makes things too easy for itself. It is ready to sneak out the back door of existence as soon as life begins. It does not have the courage for the flux, for the hard work of winning eternity in time, of pushing forward existentially for the prize which lies ahead. It is not eternity as such (Nietzsche's "real world") to which he objects but philosophy's effete manner of seeking it. He takes the side of becoming against Being, of existence against thought, of existential "interest" against metaphysics. For it is on the basis of interest that philosophy founders, that metaphysics comes to grief (SV III 189/R 149).³

Kierkegaardian repetition is the first "post-modern"⁴ attempt to come to grips with the flux, the first try not at denying it or "reconciling" it, in the manner of metaphysics, but of staying with it, of having the "courage" for the flux. Kierkegaard wants resolutely to avoid turning the world into a frozen *eidos*, stilling its movement, arresting its play, and thereby allaying our fears. He wants to stay open to the *ébranler*, the wavering and fluctuating, and to keep ready for the fear and trembling, the anxiety by which the existing individual is shaken.

In the succeeding chapters of part 1, I will show how the Kierkegaardian project of "repetition" enters into the heart of what Heidegger means by hermeneutics in *Being and Time*. Despite Heidegger's own failure to acknowledge his debt to Kierkegaard, and the tendency among Heidegger commentators to ignore Kierkegaard, the Kierkegaardian origin of what Heidegger calls "*Wiederholung*" (retrieval, repetition) cannot be denied.⁵ When *Repetition* (*Gjentagelse*, 1843) was translated into German in 1909 in the Diedrichs edition, it bore the title *Wiederholung*. And it was that early edition, which Heidegger certainly knew,⁶ which fashions in an essential way what "hermeneutics" means in *Being and Time*, as we shall show in chapter 3 below. For hermeneutics in the early sense always involves inscribing the figure of the circle on the surface of the flux like Zarathustra's eagle and that circular movement is the circle of repetition. By virtue of repetition the individual is able to press forward, not toward a sheer novelty which is wholly discontinuous with the past, but into the being which he himself is. By repetition the individual becomes himself, circling back on the being which he has been all along. Repeating the Aristotelian *to ti en einai* (that which a thing was to be), repetition is that by which the existing individual becomes what he was to be, that by which he returns to himself (*Pap.* IV A 156/R 326).

I begin with the attempts of metaphysics to deny or subvert the flux, right at

its inception in Plato (1) and in its consummation in Hegel (2). Then I turn to Constantin's psychological-phenomenological experiment (3). Finally, after surveying the three stages of repetition (4), I address the question of repetition and the "foundering" or overcoming of metaphysics (5).

Repetition And Recollection

For Constantin Constantius, to ask if repetition is possible amounts to asking whether movement is possible, whether there is such a thing as *kinesis*, after all, or whether it is just an illusion. What we get from the philosophers is either the outright denial of motion, as in the Eleatics, or some spurious theory which takes the teeth out of motion, even as it professes to be on its side. In philosophy, becoming is always getting subverted by being. That is why Constantin opens his "report" with a little philosophical prologue on the distinction between recollection and repetition (SV III 173-5/R 131-3). Among other things, this report gives the lie to Heidegger's complaint that Kierkegaard is a merely religious writer who does not appreciate the ontological dimension of the questions he asks.⁷ For, by opposing the Greek denial of motion implicit in the doctrine of recollection to Christian becoming, to the movement (*kinesis*) of "existence," Kierkegaard takes his stand with Aristotle's defense of motion against all Eleatic tendencies.

For Kierkegaard, movement in any really serious sense ought to be movement *forward*. It ought to make some progress instead of simply retracing past steps. Moving backward, if it is movement at all, is a kind of antimovement which undoes the progress that has been made. There is a certain comic quality in one who boasts that he is "on the move" when what he means is that he is backing up. But that is what the theory of "recollection" is, and that is the sort of thing that philosophers, who distrust movement, are always giving us when they speak in the name of movement.

Philosophy immanence, speculation opened its doors with a theory of pseudomovement, meant to take the sting out of the flux. The Being of the soul, Plato maintained, is to return whence it came. Its coming into the world in the first place was a fall, and so the essential thing is to undo the fall as quickly as possible, to redress the wrong which has confined the soul to the realm of change. The essential destiny of the soul is to recover its origins in the sphere of primordial Being and pure presence. Knowledge, accordingly, is not a discovery which forges ahead for that would be real movement but a recovery, a recollection, which recoups a lost cognition. Learning means to reestablish contact with a cognition that we have always already possessed, which quells the seductive aporia about how we can acquire something new. The philosopher is no friend of movement, and the Platonic account of motion is in fact a theory of antimovement, of undoing what motion there has been. Movement is falling, and hence the only movement of which speculative thought approves is the

unmovement which undoes the fall. In Plato therefore everything moves backward: from the fallen to the primordial, from the sensible to the supersensible, from the copy to the original, from loss to recovery, from forgetfulness to recollection. In short, movement is governed by a dynamics of nostalgia in which movement itself is something to be overcome.

In the place of this spurious movement Kierkegaard wants to put real movement, genuine *kinesis*. Thus he pits the Christian notion of "repetition," which forges ahead, covers new ground, against Greek recollection. To the paleness of Platonic retreat, Kierkegaard opposes the hardness of Christian, existential advance:

Say what you will, this question [whether repetition is possible] will play a very important role in modern philosophy, for *repetition* is a crucial expression for what "recollection" was to the Greeks. Just as they taught that all knowing is a recollecting, modern philosophy will teach that all life is a repetition. . . . 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. Repetition, therefore, if it is possible, makes a person happy, whereas recollection makes him unhappy assuming, of course, that he gives himself time to live and does not promptly at birth find an excuse to sneak back out of life again, for example, that he has forgotten something. (SV III 173-74/R 131)

Recollection and repetition alike undertake the transition from time to eternity. But the Greek wants to retreat back to an eternal preexistence. No sooner has life begun than speculative thought wants to sneak back out, like a philosophy professor claiming that he has forgotten his umbrella! ⁸

For the Greeks eternity always already has been; it is a presence which we always already possess but with which we have lost contact. Eternity is a lost actuality. Thus the point of philosophical speculation is to ease oneself out of time, as one would back out of a deadend, to steal back into eternity:

When the Greeks said that all knowing is recollecting, they said that all existence, which is, has been; when one says that life is a repetition, one says: actuality, which has been, now comes into existence. (SV III 189/R 149)

Recollection begins at the end instead of at the beginning, with the "loss" instead of the task (SV III 178/R 136). In the *Postscript* Johannes Climacus calls Platonic recollection a "temptation" to recollect oneself out of existence, and he says that the greatness of Socrates was to have resisted this temptation (CUP 184-85).⁹ As the movement opposite to recollection, repetition is movement indeed. It is the path from time to eternity which is cut by existence itself. It does not try to escape time but to immerse itself in it, to persevere in time. In repetition, eternity is not something lost but something to be attained, not a lost actuality but a possibility yet to be seized, not something passed (past) but something to come, not something to recover but something toward which we

must press forward. For the Christian, eternity is the prize which awaits those who keep the faith.

In Christianity eternity has the essentially *futural* meaning of the *vita ventura*, the life which is to come (and in this "to come" we hear Heidegger's "*zu-kommen*," *Zukunft*). It is the life which is promised to those who set their hands to the plow without looking back. It has to do with the possible, with effecting new life, not with reawakening one who slumbers. Repetition starts at the beginning, not at the end. It means to produce something, not to reproduce a prior presence. For the Christian, time (temporality) means an urgent task, a work to be done. Metaphysics wants to think its way out of time, while in Christianity every moment is literally momentous, an occasion for momentous choice. In the moments of time everything all eternity hangs in the balance. The Christian sees time in terms of futurity and decisiveness. But in metaphysics time and motion are an imperfection, an imitation. Nothing is decided in time; the point is to learn how to put time out of action. The love of repetition is happy, an exhilarating and earnest struggle, while the love of recollection is a nostalgic, melancholy longing for a lost paradise, a dreamy wistfulness.

For Kierkegaard the Greeks do not understand time, and they lack "the concept of temporality" (SV IV 358/CA 88). "Greek culture did not understand the moment" and "did not define it with a forward direction but with a backward direction" (SV IV 358/CA 88). The Greeks do not grasp the momentum-from *movere* in the moment nor the Pauline "twinkling of the eye" in which the world may pass away (I Cor. 15:52; SW IV 358/88). For the Greeks, time signifies no more than a passing away which should be resisted in order to regain the permanence of the lost presence. They were innocent of the radical tension within man between spirit and flesh and of the fundamental tendency to evil, error, and sin. They thought that man belongs essentially to the truth (CUP 183-85) and that he presently suffers only a temporary fall. Time is the temporariness of the fall, a passing imperfection. They have no notion of the urgency and decisiveness of time. But for the Christian everything is different:

The moment is that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other, and with this the concept of *temporality* is posited, whereby time constantly intersects eternity and eternity constantly pervades time. (SV IV 359/CA 89)

Every moment of the Christian conception of time is touched by the eternal, has the eternal at stake, is charged with the energy and momentousness of an eternal and that means of a future possibility (*vita futura*, *vita ventura*.) The future is the incognito of the eternal which is incommensurable with time (SV IV 359/CA 89). The Greeks see the moment not in terms of the primacy of the future but in terms of a past conceived merely as passing away. The authentic notion of time, of the temporality of time, is the contribution of Christianity (SV IV 359-60/CA 89-90).

A whole ontology underlies this opposition between recollection and repetition. One wonders how Heidegger can possibly have taken Kierkegaard to be only a "religious writer" with no ontological concerns. One wonders how he could have written the ontology of "temporality," which constitutes the meaning of the Being of Dasein in *Being and Time*, without so much as acknowledging Kierkegaard, when the whole analysis, in my view, derives in its main lines from Kierkegaard! ¹⁰ Kierkegaard wants to undo the prestige of the metaphysics of presence embodied in Platonic recollection and to have us think instead in terms of temporality and movement (*kinesis*). Repetition is *kinesis*, the way the existing individual makes his way through time, the constancy with which he confronts the withering effects of time upon character and faith.

The old dispute between Heraclitus and the Eleatics thus has for Kierkegaard an ethico-religious significance. If Constantin's return trip to Berlin is a "parody" of existential repetition (*Pap.* IV B 111 269/294), the real question is whether existential movement is possible. Is it possible for the existing spirit to live in time without, on the one hand, being dissipated by the flux and losing his identity or, on the other hand, without retreating from time and existence into timeless speculation? His response to this question repeats the Aristotelian gesture of feeling around for the elusive reality of *kinesis* which "exists" in the interplay of potentiality and actuality, which is neither the one nor the other, for it is that in-between land which alone describes the dynamics of freedom:

In the sphere of freedom, however, [as opposed to that of logic] possibility remains and actuality emerges as a transcendence. Therefore, when Aristotle long ago said that the transition from possibility to actuality is a *kinesis* (motion, change), he was not speaking of logical possibility and actuality but of freedom's, and therefore he properly posits movement. (*Pap.* IV B117 290/R 309-310)

Like Heidegger, Kierkegaard regarded Aristotle as the supreme thinker of the ancient world. Both Kierkegaard and Heidegger were drawn to the Aristotelian critique of Platonic intellectualism, to Aristotle's taste for the dynamics of concrete existence. Contrary to Heidegger's view of matter, Kierkegaard pressed a strictly ontological issue or, better, he pressed against the limits of ontology, precisely in order to make room for existential movement which ontology tries systematically either to exclude or to make over in its own image.

Repetition And Mediation

The theory of recollection at least has the virtue of honesty. Recollection is an intelligible and frank attempt to undo the movement of time and becoming because it understands the sharp difference between eternity and time, logic and existence, Being and becoming. Kierkegaard thought there really were only two ways to address the question of movement: either to affirm it, with the

category of repetition, or to negate it, with the category of recollection. Either way one makes sense of the flux.

The dialectics of repetition is easy, for that which is repeated has been otherwise it could not be repeated but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new. When the Greeks said that all knowing is recollecting, they said that all existence, which is, has been; when one says that life is a repetition, one says: actuality, which has been, now comes into existence. If one does not have the category of recollection nor of repetition, all life dissolves into an empty, meaningless noise. (SV III 189/R 149)

Without either recollection or repetition there is nothing but the flux, nothing but a meaningless turmoil. Recollection stills the turmoil; repetition finds a way to maintain one's head in the midst of it. Recollection says that everything important has already been. Repetition says that actuality must be continually produced, brought forth anew, again and again. Identity must be established, produced. Identity, as Derrida would say, is an effect of repetition. [11](#)

The worst muddle, however, would be to look for a way to reconcile movement, to try to mediate it, with Being and eternity. Mediation, which attempts to find a third tiling between recollection and repetition, is foolish chatter and a confusion:

It is incredible how much flurry has been made in Hegelian philosophy over mediation and how much foolish talk has enjoyed honor and glory under this rubric. One should rather seek to think through mediation and then give a little credit to the Greeks. The Greek explanation of the theory of being and nothing, the explanation of "the moment," "non-being", etc., trumps Hegel. "Mediation" is a foreign word; "repetition" is a good Danish word, and I congratulate the Danish language on a philosophical term. There is no explanation in our age as to how mediation takes place, whether it results from the motion of the two factors and in what sense it is already contained in them, or whether it is something new that is added, and, if so, how. In this connection, the Greek view of the concept of *kinesis* corresponds to the modern category "transition" and should be given close attention. (SV III 189/R 148-49)

The Greeks either frankly denied motion (the Eleatic view) or produced an honest Aristotelian account of it (*kinesis*, which is taken over by the category of repetition). But mediation is a misguided attempt to accommodate motion to Being, which equivocates about whether there really is motion, about whether anything really new emerges, or whether motion is not kept all along under the constraints of necessity and timelessness.

Kierkegaard distrusted speculation, and he thought that metaphysics always ended up in a denial or subversion of time and motion. The project of "overcoming metaphysics," of the critique of the "metaphysics of presence," was launched by Kierkegaard, although he had to wait for philosophy professors like

Heidegger and Derrida to give his project conceptual formulation and thematic development. (He did, however, as we have pointed out, speak of the "foundering of metaphysics.") Metaphysics cannot digest movement, becoming, temporality, genuine novelty, and the attempt to do so results in ludicrous logicizations. Plato understood clearly the incompatibility of time and movement with philosophical speculation and hence defined philosophy in terms of its capacity to remove itself from them. Platonism was more candid; it simply confessed the incommensurability of time and movement with philosophical thought and urged philosophy to learn to die to such shadowy realities. Hence while Kierkegaard criticized *anamnesis* because it was a direct attack on motion, he criticized Hegelian *Aufhebung* as a more insidious, subversive attack on motion, one which put up the front of being a friend of motion, the final effect of which was in fact comic. ¹² To a great extent, I think, Derrida's readings of Hegel are a counterpart to Kierkegaard's, for they keep Hegel honest and make him stick to his guns about movement and difference instead of slipping quietly through the back door of metaphysics.

Hegel made a show of embracing time and *kinesis* even while subverting them to his own purposes. Hegelian time is not authentic, radical, Christian temporality, in which everything hinges on the "instant," the decision. It is a time which is not exposed to flux and contingency but precisely insulated from their effects. It is a time made safe by eternity, underwritten by reason, regulated by necessity. In Derrida's terms, Hegelian mediation wants to arrest the play even as it appears to affirm it. Hegelian time lacks what is truly proper to time: contingency, freedom, exposure to the future. It pays public homage to history and temporality while in private it subverts them, subordinating them to a rational teleology which monitors and controls their movements. Hegelian time is time reworked by metaphysics, made over into its image and likeness, and in which the groundlessness of radical freedom, which belongs to the essence of time and *kinesis*, is revoked.

Kierkegaard has a profoundly Protestant and voluntaristic conception of things. ¹³ The very Being of the world is contingent inasmuch as it originates in a free act of divine creation, and everything that happens in the world happens contingently. Not even the laws of nature give evidence of pure necessity since the phenomena which these laws govern might never have existed and since the laws themselves could be altered by the divine freedom. The Christian world is free; the Greek world is necessitarian. ¹⁴ When Kierkegaard speaks of the "transcendence" of movement, he means the absolute unpredictability of the next moment from the present, an Ockhamistic contingency in the successive moments of change, a Cartesian "conservation of the universe" from moment to moment thanks to the divine freedom. Aristotle alone among the Greeks recognized the contingency in things, although even he did not distinguish sharply enough between the necessary and the possible (PF 93).

Now whatever occurs in time occurs contingently, since at first it was not, and then at a later time it came to be. Coming to be "is *ipso facto* historical" (PF 93). Hence it is a sophistry to confuse the immutability of the past with any alleged necessity of the past. The past is the historical and as such contingent, i.e., it is something which has come into existence. Its contingency is not removed by the passage of time. The merely external fact that it is now a past event does not annul the truth that when it happened this event could have been otherwise. Indeed, to say that the past is necessary is equivalent to predicting the future, for if the contingency of the one is annulled, the contingency of the other must likewise be annulled.

Hegelianism is therefore fraudulent, for it arises from an intellectual illusion which is akin to an optical illusion.

Distance in time tends to promote an intellectual illusion, just as distance in space provokes a sensory illusion. A contemporary does not perceive the necessity of what comes into existence, but when centuries intervene between the event and the beholder he perceives the necessity, just as distance makes the square tower seem round. (PF 98)

Indeed Hegelianism is comic, for it attempts to wed logic and existence, necessity and freedom, thought and *kinesis*. Hegel wants to affirm the reality of time and becoming, but his affirmation is half-hearted, for he insists that there is a logical necessity inscribed in time, that time unfolds in accordance with the categories of reason, or contrariwise, that time is inscribed in logic, that the categories move, that they undergo becoming and *kinesis*. But time and contingency, the conditions of reality, forever resist the idealizing efforts of thought. Thought can flourish only in the element of necessity and essence, and it can appropriate becoming only at the expense of what is definitive for it, viz., its very contingency. Whence comes Climacus's account of "Lessing's Thesis" in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (§4): it is possible for thought to construct a system, but the price it must pay is high, viz., such a system can lay no claim to reality. Conversely, any account which is faithful to existence must be prepared to face the worst, to founder on the paradox, for an existential account moves in an element which is hostile to thought, viz., time and *kinesis*.

We are now in a position to understand the claims of Constantin Constantius about the difference between Hegelian "mediation" and repetition. We are here indebted to a review of *Repetition* published by the Hegelian theologian J. L. Heiberg, the banality of which so outraged Kierkegaard that he was provoked to respond, again under the name of Constantin, with an illuminating commentary on *Repetition* which he did not, however, publish but which we are fortunate to have available in the new English edition of *Repetition*.

Heiberg accuses Constantin of naturalizing repetition by treating it in terms of movement. But Constantin's argument is that movement in its truest and

most radical sense belongs above all to the individual spirit. For Heiberg movement in the realm of the spirit is at best the movement of world history, which is in fact governed by necessity and mediation, a movement whose dynamics are controlled by logic.

In logic, transition is movement's silence, whereas in the sphere of freedom it becomes. Thus, in logic, when possibility, by means of the immanence of thought, has determined itself as actuality, one only disturbs the silent self-inclosure of the logical process by talking about movement and transition. (*Pap.* IV 117 290/R 309)

The movement of logic is an unreal, noiseless hush. It is nothing more than an unfolding of necessity, no more than a quiet rustle among concepts. There is talk about movement but no real movement. "In the sphere of freedom, however," Constantin continues, "possibility remains and actuality emerges as a transcendence" (*Pap.* IV 117 290/R 309-10). Here possibility is followed by an actuality genuinely transcendent to the possibility from which it emerges. Here in freedom, which is movement in the preeminent sense something new in fact appears. The actuality is transcendent to the possibility, not determined, enclosed, and precontained by it. The transition is alive with all of the noise and bustle of existence and genuine *kinesis*. Thus the whole question for Constantin is whether repetition is *possible*.

But as soon as the individual is viewed in his freedom, the question becomes a different one: Can repetition be realized? It is repetition in this pregnant sense as a task for freedom and as freedom that gives the title to my little book and that in my little book has come into being depicted and made visible in the individuality and in the situation. . . . (*Pap.* IV B117 293/R 312-13)

Repetition means the task set for the individual to persevere in time, to stay with the flux, to produce his identity as an effect. And this ultimately is the religious task. The highest expression of repetition is the religious movement in which the individual passes from sin to atonement. Here is the most dramatic instance of a qualitative transition, of a transformation of the individual in which something new and transcendent is produced. Atonement, which is completely transcendent to the sin which it displaces, is repetition in the highest sense, *sensu eminentiore* (*Pap.* IV B117 302/R 320). Sin cannot be mediated but only forgiven. The transition is not lodged on the level of immanence but is a genuine passage, a genuine movement of transcendence, one indeed which is possible only in virtue of the absurd, that is, of faith in the power of God to intervene and to effect what logic and mediation can neither understand nor carry out (SV IV B117 293-94/R313). No such radical *kinesis* is possible in metaphysics, in Platonism or in Hegelianism. Such a repetition has nothing to do with world-historical progress or astronomy:

In the individual, then, repetition appears as a task for freedom, in which the question becomes that of saving one's personality from being volatilized and, so to speak, a pawn to events. The moment it is apparent the individual can lose himself in events, fate, lose himself in such a way that he therefore by no means stops contemplating but loses himself in such a way that freedom is taken completely in life's fractions without leaving a remainder behind, then the issue becomes manifest, not to contemplation's aristocratic indolence, but to freedom's concerned passion. (*Pap.* IV B117 296/R 315)

Repetition is the power of the individual to forge his personality out of the chaos of events, in the midst of the flux, the power to create an identity in the face of the incessant "dispersal" of the self (*Pap.* IV B117 303/R 320), of the dissipating effects of the flux. There is always a "remainder" no matter how much is subtracted from the individual by the taxing business of everyday existence. Repetition is the exacting task of constituting the self as a self.

In sum, recollection retreats and repetition presses forward, but mediation makes a great show of movement, a grand but silent display of movement, like a mime who appears to be racing along while all the time he remains in place on the stage.

Letters To Constantin

It is in the context of this elaborate ontological preparation that Kierkegaard's *Repetition* his "whimsical" treatise, his little joke should be read. I have concentrated so far on the ontology which is written in the margins, in occasional excursions which interrupt the narrative, and in the unpublished papers. The text itself is meant to illustrate this abstract ontology with a concrete example, a psychological, phenomenological case study. ¹⁵ The first part, "Constantin's Report," is an account of a distraught young friend of Constantin's, caught in the throes of a difficult love affair. The second part, "Repetition," consists of a series of letters from the young man to Constantin. The second half of the text, which repeats the title, is the "serious" part (but are we to take that seriously?), where we really get to repetition, while the first half is a parody of genuine repetition.

This is not the place to undertake a detailed account of Kierkegaard's narrative but only to highlight certain features of the text. We are introduced to a young man who has fallen deeply but unhappily in love, for the girl he loves is no more than an occasion which has awakened the poetic nature in him. He is not so much in love with the girl, as in love with love itself and the occasion this affair provides him for poetizing. He is thus already in a stage of recollection which keeps leaping over life. He begins with the loss of the girl. He is not ready for the day-to-day work of making love last a lifetime. His love of this girl

keeps getting transformed into "Eternal Love," the "Idea" of love, of which she is but the "visible form" (SV III 182/R 141). While her love for him is naturally directed toward the ethical relationship of marriage, his love for her keeps being diverted into the poetic. She moves in the sphere of ethical actuality, he in the sphere of poetic ideality. Constantin devises a scheme aimed at dissolving the relationship in which the young man would make himself out to be an unfaithful womanizer. This would provoke the girl to break off the relationship herself, leaving her with her honor intact and the feeling that she had saved herself from a bad marriage. She would be in the right, and the young man would look to be in the wrong (SV III 183/R 142). But the young man lacks the nerve for the plan and simply absconds from Copenhagen to Stockholm.

The problem with the young man, Constantin conjectures, is that he may really be in love with the girl and not have the courage to follow the way of repetition out of his predicament (SV III 186/R 145). The young man faces the critical juncture between recollection and repetition. On the one hand, he may transform his concrete relationship with this girl into ideality and thus enter the poetic. On the other hand, he may press bravely ahead in the sphere of reality, making the real relationship work out with the hard work of a day-to-day faithfulness which would break with his poetizing, idealizing tendency. He may either retreat backward into poetic eternity or press forward to produce eternity in time, that is, a good marriage. In fact he just retreats, turning on his heels and fleeing.

At this point Constantin is driven to wonder whether repetition is possible at all, and so he undertakes the satiric experiment in repetition, whose seriousness is to be compared to Diogenes' attempt to refute the Eleatics merely by walking back and forth. He will undertake a return trip to Berlin, to see if he can repeat the pleasures of a previous holiday. The whole trip is a series of disasters, like the farce which he sees at the Königsberg Theatre, and proof positive that repetition is not possible. Constantin is humiliated. He who counsels the young man to repetition no longer believes in it himself (SV III 210/R 172).

Life is a swindle, Constantin complains. Instead of giving a repetition (*Gjentagelse*, literally: again-taking, re-taking, repetition), life simply takes everything back again (*tage Alt igjen*) (R 368, n. 79). Instead of providing us with a continuity, a repetition which enables us to move ahead, life just exposes us to the flux. The more we try to put life in order, the bigger the mess we create. We would be better off if we simply lived without care, like a child who is constantly being rescued from disaster by his nursemaid, and let things take their course.

The failure to achieve repetition throws us back into the flux, the Heraclitean stream. There are only two ways to come to grips with the flux: recollection and repetition. And Constantin is capable of neither.

Do not all agree, both ecclesiastical and secular speakers, both poets and prose writers, both skippers and undertakers, both heroes and cowards do they not all agree that life is a stream? How can one get such a foolish idea [repetition], and, still more foolishly, how can one want to make a principle of it? . . . Long live the stagecoach horn! It is the instrument for me for many reasons, and chiefly because one can never be certain of wheedling the same notes from this horn. A coach horn has infinite possibilities, and the person who puts it to his mouth and puts wisdom into it can never be guilty of a repetition. . . . Praised be the coach horn. It is my symbol. Just as the ancient ascetics placed a skull on the table, the contemplation of which constituted their view of life, so the coach horn on my table always reminds me of the meaning of life. But the journey is not worth the trouble, for one need not stir from the spot to be convinced that there is no repetition. No, one sits calmly in one's living room; when all is vanity and passes away, one nevertheless speeds faster than on a train, even though sitting still. . . . Travel on you fugitive river. (SV III 212-13/R 174-76)

Constantin alludes not only to Heraclitus but also to Job. Like the Lord, life gives and takes away, and we would do better to live like a child or the birds of the air, who sow not nor reap ready to bless the name of the Lord, who will find a way to give-again (*gjen-tagelse*) what life takes away. The taking away and giving again, which defines repetition, is modeled after Job's famous declaration.

The story of Constantin's trip is a parody, a satire, of true repetition, which must be of a more inward, more religious character than was Constantin's effort to reconstruct a holiday in Berlin. Constantin's vacation is comically juxtaposed to the allusion to Heraclitus, Job, and religious repetition. We are thus to conclude not that repetition generally is impossible but only that "aesthetic" repetition, which is at the mercy of circumstances and accidental factors, is impossible. Constantin's journey proves that aesthetics, which is devoted solely to the interesting, should fear repetition and cultivate instead the art of variation, which always knows how to produce something interesting and hence to stave off boredom.

The question of the possibility of repetition has not been decided in the negative but raised up a notch, forcing us to discuss it in terms of the religious category. Thus the second half of the book "Repetition" repeats the title and repeats the question whether repetition is possible now by way of a series of letters to Constantin from the absconded young man. The question of repetition is repeated, not as a farce, not as a whimsical trip to Berlin, but on a higher level, as the drama of the ethico-religious fate of the nameless young man. For the young man is in a crisis; he has reached a crucial turning point, a fork in the road of life.

Constantin seems to have misjudged the young man. He thought him to possess only a dreamy, imaginative love which belongs to the category of

recollection, but he finds him caught up in a real love, snared by actuality. The young man is left with no choice but to press forward into marriage, love's ethical consummation but being a poet, too, he is incapable of marriage. He must press forward, but he cannot a dilemma whose only solution is religious.

He has now come to the borderline of the marvelous [faith]; consequently, if it [repetition] is to take place at all, it must take place by virtue of the absurd. (SV III 220/R 185)

But again Constantin cannot help suspecting that it is really not the girl herself who matters. Perhaps the girl is still an occasion, not now for the poetic but for the religious. In either case, then, the young man would make himself an exception and have no business with marriage, the ethical universal (SV III 220/R 185). The young man is in a crisis of repetition:

The issue that brings him to a halt is nothing more nor less than repetition. He is right not to seek clarification in philosophy, either Greek or modern, for the Greeks make the opposite movement, and here a Greek would choose to recollect without tormenting his conscience. Modern philosophy [Hegel] makes no movement; as a rule it makes only a commotion, and if it makes any movement at all, it is always within immanence, whereas repetition is and remains a transcendence. It is fortunate that he does not seek any explanation from me, for I have abandoned my theory. I am adrift. Then, too, repetition is too transcendent for me. Fortunately, my friend is not looking for clarification from any world-famous philosopher or any *professor publicus ordinarius*; he turns to an unprofessional thinker who once possessed the world's glories but later withdrew from life in other words, he falls back on Job. (SV III 221/R 186)

Then follow the young man's letters. The young man explains that Constantin's fraudulent scheme to deceive the girl was repugnant to his ethical instincts. He has found better counsel in Job who, driven to life's extreme, keeps repeating "the Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Job repeats the prayer of repetition, that is, of resoluteness in adversity, of the self-possession which knows how to press forward no matter what. In particular, Job resists the explanation that his suffering is a just punishment for his sins and insists upon his innocence. It is merely human wisdom, ethical rationality, which explains his situation in terms of guilt. Ethically, he is innocent. That is just the situation of the young man. Like Job he finds himself thrust into a situation not of his own making and then declared guilty. In a passage clearly anticipating Heidegger's notion of "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*), the young man laments:

I am at the end of my rope. I am nauseated by life; it is insipid without salt and meaning. . . . Where am I? What does it mean to say: the world? What is the meaning of that word? Who tricked me into this whole thing and leaves me standing here? Who am I? How did I get into the world? Why was I not asked

about it, why was I not informed of the rules and regulations but just thrust into the ranks as if I had been bought from a peddling shanghaier of human beings? How did I get involved in this big enterprise called actuality? And if I am compelled to be involved, where is the manager I have something to say about this. Is there no manager? To whom shall I make my complaint? . . . How did it happen that I became guilty? Or am I not guilty? Why, then, am I called that in every language? . . .

Why should she be in the right and I in the wrong? 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? (SV III 234-35/R 200-201)

If he marries her, that will destroy her because of his poetic nature. If he does not marry her, he is guilty. If he marries her, he is indeed guilty; if he does not marry her, he is declared guilty by human language. Here is an either/or which no judge can resolve. And so he offers a reward to anyone who can invent a word for his state, who can find a category which names the condition of being innocent and seeming guilty. His condition is nameless, even as he himself is nameless. He is at a standstill, immobilized; he sees no way to press ahead.

Clearly all the possibilities of rational human discourse have been exhausted. The only way out is religious. And that is why he reads the book of Job with the eyes of his heart, which is the only way to deal with his "nameless anxiety about the world and life and men and everything" (SV III 239/R 205). The secret to repetition is in Job (SV III 241/R 207). Job was able to press forward, even though the whole world disagreed; he had the power to resist the ethical. explanation. He knew the whole thing was not punishment for guilt but an "ordeal" in which God was putting his faith to the test. That is a category which does not exist in science; it is a strictly religious category which exists only for the individual. Because of faithfulness, Job's thunderstorm passes (SV III 247/R 214), and he is given back double everything that had been taken away from him. That is his repetition (SV III 245/R 212).

Job, however, is not a hero of faith, properly speaking, but of the region which lies just at the outskirts of faith. ". . . Job's significance is that the disputes at the boundaries of faith are fought out in him. . ." (SV III 243/R 210). An "ordeal" is a strictly religious category it cannot be invoked on just any occasion, as when the oatmeal burns! but it does not yet touch upon the extremities of Christian faith. The absurdity Job faces is not the absolute paradox of Christian belief. An ordeal is a temporary condition, which is rewarded at the end by a worldly repetition. Christian faith runs deeper than that.

But the application of Job's life to the young man is clear:

All I know is that I am standing and have been standing *suspense gradu* [immobilized] for a whole month now, without moving a foot or making one single movement.

I am waiting for a thunderstorm and for repetition.

What will be the effect of this thunderstorm? It will make me fit to be a husband. It will shatter my whole personality I am prepared. It will render me almost unrecognizable to myself I am unwavering even though I am standing on one foot. . . .

In other respects, I am doing my best to make myself into a husband. I sit and clip myself, take away everything that is incommensurable in order to become commensurable. (SV III 247-48/R 214)

Unable of his own strength to enter into marriage everything rational in him tells him that marriage would destroy the girl and destroy himself he awaits a transformation by God which will make him a fit husband and restore his honor, which will render his exceptional condition commensurable with the universal ethical measure. He cannot make progress, cannot take another step further, cannot make a movement except in virtue of faith.¹⁶

Now Constantin inserts a word, in between the letters, like an aside from offstage: he distrusts the whole thing; he does not believe in thunderstorms. He is sure the whole thing will come to grief as it does in the next letter:

She is married to whom I do not know, for when I read it in the newspaper I was so stunned that I dropped the paper and have not had the patience since then to check in detail. I am myself again. Here I have repetition; I understand everything, and life seems more beautiful to me than ever. It did indeed come like a thunderstorm, although I am indebted to her generosity for its coming. . . . Let existence reward her as it has, let it give her what she loved more; it also gave me what I loved more myself, and gave it to me through generosity. (SV III 253/R 220)

The repetition is that he is given himself back. But this is not religious repetition. His freedom is to be employed not in the service of God but in the service of the poetic idea. Despite the flirtation with the religious, the deeply religious tone of the thunderstorm, despite the invocation of Job, the young man becomes a poetic, not a religious exception to marriage (SV III 254-55/R 221-22).

But it is to Constantin that Kierkegaard gives the last word, and with good reason, for now Constantin confesses that the nameless young man does not exist, that he is an experiment devised by Constantin himself (SV III 262/R 228). Both parts of *Repetition* thus are a kind of farce, an imaginative construct, the end result of which is to show that repetition is nowhere to be found not in Constantin, not in the young man, not in philosophy, not even, properly, in Job. Genuine religious repetition keeps deferring itself. It is nowhere to be found in this book, or in any book. It cannot be circumscribed by the margins of a book.¹⁷ The young man was an analogue, a parody, of religious repetition (SV III 262/R 228).

The critical point the young man reached was the point of readiness for divine action, where he had completely surrendered his own sense of self-sufficiency and put himself at the disposal of God's action on him. He was ready to have his whole nature as a poetic exception destroyed and to be remade in God's image,

according to God's plan for him. That is the point of religious repetition, when we are ready to let God make something new in us, effect a transcendence in us of which we are incapable ourselves. But when the thunderstorm came, he managed to break through, not to the religious, but to a poetic existence in which he is loosened from the universality of marriage and free to exist as a poetic exception, thanks to the girl. That is his repetition, which consists in "the raising of his consciousness to the second power" (SV III 263/R 229). But *that* repetition is but an imperfect analogue and transition stage to a higher repetition which he at times skirted but never attained (SV III 263/R 229). When the thunderstorm broke, he took the poetic way out, instead of weathering it out religiously (SV III 263/R 229-30).

The forward momentum of existence can be sustained only by the energy of faith. The passion of existence which remains faithful to the chosen way must be the passion of faith, which operates "with religious fear and trembling, but also with faith and trust" (SV III 263/R 230). In the end, repetition is possible neither for Constantin nor for the young man. The experiment undertaken in *Repetition* ends in failure, but this is meant, not to fill us with despair about the possibility of repetition, but rather to sharpen our sense of its illusive and self-deferring quality, of the demands it makes. It is meant to persuade us that repetition is not to be found within the margins of a book. It is a way of writing a book about repetition which arises from an understanding that we have reached the end of the book (cf. CUP, "A First and Last Declaration").

Repetition And The Stages Of Existence

We can clarify what Kierkegaard means by repetition by differentiating the well-known "stages" or "spheres of existence" the aesthetic, ethical, and religious. Clearly, aesthetic repetition has proven to be a disaster. Repetition spells the end of aesthetics and hence must be feared, for repetition "has a magic power to keep [aesthetic] freedom captive" (*Pap.* IV B 117 281/R 301). It is the death of unqualified pleasure seeking. With each repetition the edge of aesthetic pleasure is dulled until it becomes tedious and vanishes. The trip to Berlin is an exercise in naive aesthetic repetition, simple reduplication. Constantin is unwary, naive; he thinks a pleasure can just be reenacted, reproduced. Had he been a little more clever he would have had the sense to fear repetition, to see in it the enemy of freedom-as-pleasure seeking.

Hence the despair of straightforward pleasure seeking generates a higher form of aestheticism equipped with a "sagacity," a finite, worldly wisdom illustrated by the famous "Rotation Method" (in *Either/Or*, vol. 1) meant to fool repetition (SV IV B 117 281/R 301-302). If the repetition of a pleasure dulls it, then freedom must learn to be more cunning. On the aesthetic level, the question is not indeed whether repetition is possible that was Constantin's

mistake but whether it is *avoidable*. The whole problem for the aesthete then is to acquire the art of variation and constant alteration. The rotation method is a shrewd and systematic attempt to offset the fatal effects of repetition upon aesthetic life, a way to keep it at bay and avoid it, always altering pleasure so as to keep pleasure alive. But this too breaks down in despair, to the extreme of the Seducer and his repugnant treatment of Cordelia. Aesthetically speaking, the Seducer is a higher type more reflective, more careful, and premeditating but ethically he is cruel and diabolical. Ethically repulsed, we are driven to seek higher ground.

Freedom becomes itself, becomes truly free, not when it seeks ways to evade repetition, but when it seeks repetition itself, when it asks the guiding question of *Repetition*:

Now freedom's supreme interest is precisely to bring about repetition, and its only fear is that variation would have the power to disturb its eternal nature. Here emerges the issue: *Is repetition possible?* Freedom itself is now the repetition. . . . What freedom fears here is not repetition but variation; what it wants is not variation but repetition. (SV IV B 117 281-82/R 302)

Here repetition is looked upon not as a fatal affliction which kills off the life of freedom but as freedom itself. The rotation method has as little to do with real repetition as does an alehouse keeper who happens to look like the king. We ought to smile at Constantin's trip to Berlin as we would smile at such a man. True freedom and genuine repetition converge; repetition has become inward, a matter of freedom, of "the individuality's own repetition raised to a new power" (*Pap.* IV B 111 270/R 294).

With that, the question of repetition enters the sphere of the ethical and religious. But it is important to distinguish the two. The ethical significance of repetition is embodied in marriage, whose aesthetic validity and higher ethical worth are defended by the Judge in the second volume of *Either/Or*. All of the books written just after the breach with Regine are addressed to her; they are explanations to her, and to Kierkegaard himself, of what he had done, of why he made of himself an exception and departed from the ethical-universal, whose Archimedean point is married life. The Judge, who represents conjugal fidelity, the paradigm case of ethical repetition, attacks the aesthete on the grounds that for him genuine love is impossible (E/O II 144).

The aesthete lacks substance and actuality. His relationship with the girl ends like a novel, at the point where the lovers are to get married, which is precisely the point where the ethical begins (E/O II 144). Marriage is eternity, not the moment; actuality, not flirtation; possession, not conquest. The aesthete is intoxicated with first love, by the charm of the first kiss, the first embrace, but the Judge knows that first love is unhistorical it has not proved itself in time whereas marriage is tested by time and ripened by development. ¹⁸ What the

aesthete fears most about time is monotony (E/O II 128ff.) boredom, it was noted in the "Rotation Method," is the *radix malorum* for he cannot imagine love when it is not young and new. He dreads the repetition of marriage because of a defective understanding of time. He prefers the time which leads up to something and then is over and done with (E/O II 138). He knows nothing of ethical time, the toilsome process in which something is slowly built up and grows into the fullness of its being. The ethical individual has learned to do battle, not with dragons and lions, but with the most difficult enemy of all, time. He has learned to hold fast in time, both by finding constancy in the midst of the flux, and by finding novelty in the midst of the customary and everyday. Marriage and the ethical have a different conception of time and repetition, says the Judge, for where the aesthete finds monotony the ethical man finds preservation and increase.

Repetition is thus the centerpiece in Kierkegaard's "existential theory of the self." For the self is defined by choice, as something to be "won" (E/O II 167). This is an ethical, not a metaphysical, account of the self (which clearly anticipates §64 of *Being and Time*), which treats the self not as a substance, a permanent presence which endures beneath the changing fortunes of age and bodily change, but as a task to be achieved not as presence but as possibility. Without choice, the individual lapses into the diversions of "half hour works" (E/O II 202). The aesthete lacks memory, not in the usual sense but in the sense of "memory of your own life, of what you have experienced in it" (E/O II 202). For the aesthete the past is simply over; it has lost all interest for him. But the ethical individual has long memory, stretching himself out toward his past, for which he assumes responsibility, even as he stretches himself out anticipatorily toward what is expected of him in the future, holding his entire life together in the unity and continuity of a self, thereby constituting himself as a self:

Only when in his choice a man has assumed himself . . . has so totally penetrated himself that every moment is attended by the consciousness of a responsibility for himself, only then has he chosen himself ethically, only then has he repeated himself . . . (E/O II 207-208)

To speak of choosing oneself is of course paradoxical, for the self does not exist until it is brought forth by choice, and yet the self must exist if it is to choose:

. . . that which is chosen does not exist and comes into existence with the choice; that which is chosen exists, otherwise there would not be a choice. For in case what I chose did not exist but absolutely came into existence with the choice, I would not be choosing, I would be creating; but I do not create myself, I choose myself. (E/O II 219-20)

Kierkegaardian repetition, like Derrida's, is productive. It does not limp along after, trying to reproduce what is already present, but is productive of what it is

repeating. The repeating is the producing of the self. But not absolutely: One does not create *ex nihilo* but always beginning from a situated standpoint one gradually carves out an identity for oneself. The paradox is resolved, therefore, in a way which anticipates the hermeneutical paradoxes in §32 and §33 in *Being and Time*: by introducing a kind of existential circle, according to which the self by choosing the self comes to be the being which it all along has been:

He becomes himself, quite the same self he was before, down to the last significant peculiarity, and yet he becomes another, for the choice permeates everything and transforms it. (E/O II 227)

He does not create something altogether new, but actualizes what he has been all along (*to ti en einai*).

Repetition thus is not an ethical gymnastics which thinks anything possible. It begins with the situatedness in which one finds oneself. It is not abstract freedom but the freedom to actualize possibilities. It does not depend upon the favor of world history to give it an opportunity, but it knows how to find the possible in any situation in which it is put. It knows how to transform necessity (facticity) into freedom. The individual knows himself:

. . . as this definite individual, with these talents, these dispositions, these instincts, these passions, influenced by these definite surroundings, as this definite product of a definite environment. But being conscious of himself in this way, he assumes responsibility for all of this. (E/O II 255)

If necessity thrusts him into a certain place, freedom chooses this place. Freedom knows that it is not possible always to have good fortune but that the essential thing is "what one sees in every situation, with what energy he regards it" (E/O II 257). The ethical does not require one to be in the right place at the right time, for the essentials of ethical repetition are at hand in any time or place. The aesthete requires good fortune, but the ethical requires only one thing, "and that is . . . his self" (E/O II 257).

In sum, repetition on the ethical level is the constancy and continuity of choice by which the self constitutes itself as a self, by which it returns again and again to its own innermost resolution and establishes its moral identity. Ethical repetition means the steadiness of the unbroken vow, the enduring bond of the lasting marriage, the capacity to find ever new depths in the familiar and selfsame. It means a recurrent cycle of growth and development by means of which the self becomes itself.

But eventually the bravado of ethical repetition must come to grief. In the ethical, one needs only oneself, and that is its illusion. The ethical sphere is predicated on the false assumption that everything in life is weighed on the scales of human justice, that it means everything to be innocent. But what if a man were entirely innocent and yet still suffered? Furthermore, what if a man

attributes such innocence as he has to himself, as if there were something to him of himself, independently of his God-relationship? Ethical repetition maintains the illusion that a resolute will with good intention is enough to constitute the self, to keep a man whole, that a balance is possible between the ethical and the aesthetic factors in the personality. The Judge's argument against the aesthete is that the self cannot be dependent upon external factors, upon the vagaries of good fortune. But that argument finally skews because it leads in the end to the illusion of the self-sufficiency of the will. What if a man were ethically whole, a just man, and yet is struck down and deprived of all aesthetic immediacy, which, according to the Judge, is an integral complement to ethical righteousness, part of the balanced whole of the personality? Ethics suffers from the illusion that repetition lies within its power.

Relative to the idle caprice of the rotation method, ethical repetition presses forward resolutely, makes progress, effects transcendence. But inasmuch as it calls upon nothing more than human resources, upon resolve and firmness of will, ethical repetition pushes ahead within the sphere of immanence. Repetition in its deepest registers, therefore, has to do with the exception, with the breakdown of the human, the loss of human compensation, a transformation which shatters the categories of immanence. It concerns that most extreme inwardness which arises only from the shipwreck of ethical humanism.¹⁹ Genuine repetition, which is absolutely transcendent and effected in virtue of the absurd, occurs only when the individual does not see how he can go on, when every rational human resource is exhausted. Then the individual gives up everything and awaits the thunderstorm. The young man reached that point, but he had recourse to the poetic, not the religious, when the thunderstorm broke. The young man was caught in an ethical paradox; he was guilty but he had done no wrong. Here indeed was a stumbling block to confound the Judge's cheery moralism and ethical balancing act. That is the importance of Job, who saw his suffering not as punishment for a wrongdoing but as purposely visited upon him by God so as to accentuate the purely personal God-relationship and to diminish the juridical one.

Job and the young man reach the point of the breakdown of the ethical wisdom and sanguine rationality of the Judge. They enter a sphere not governed by the rule of credit and debit, investment and return, an economy of expenditure without reserve.²⁰ In this mad religious economy, if one gives up everything, everything is repeated, returned, even a hundredfold, in virtue of the absurd. Here there is not sound reason but a "play" in which the world, that is, the hand of God, is playing with man in order to humble his finite understanding and lead him into another and transcendent sphere. Repetition is reached not by achieving ethical steadfastness but by realizing that, from a human standpoint, everything is lost, that there is nowhere to turn (SV III 245-46/R 212). At that point we learn what we have all along heard in the sermons:

that unless a man loses his soul he cannot have it back, that of himself a man can do nothing. These are the first laws of the dynamics of religious repetition, of the religious way through the flux.

Indeed, even Job and Abraham fall short of this demanding sense of repetition. The paradox they faced was not the absolute paradox, and the repetition they were granted retained an earthly sense: the restoration of Job's goods and honor and the restoration of Isaac. Thus, the repetition had not been sufficiently interiorized, had not yet been driven inward. Repetition cannot have to do with the restoration of outward goods. Repetition is a law of inwardness which moves ahead precisely in virtue of outward loss. The outer loss is an inner gain; the detachment from the finite is progress toward the infinite. The whole question of finitude becomes a matter of indifference (SV III 263/R 230). Repetition takes place only if the finite is crucified and the individual surrenders everything in order to enter the divine absence, the dark night, the fear and the trembling. The individual takes his stand in the abyss, endures the withdrawal of presence, lets himself be led by God, who is alone the true teacher of repetition. In the abyss of the God-relationship the individual is able to move ahead. True repetition is the radical transition from sin to atonement. Therefore, the only authentic *kinesis*, which is repetition, is set in motion by eternity. [21](#)

Repetition And The End Of Metaphysics

Kierkegaard inaugurated the delimitation of the metaphysical tradition which today is spoken of in terms of "the end of philosophy," "the end of metaphysics" and it is a great mistake on the part of the Heideggerians to write him off as a merely religious or psychological thinker. Far from having only a passing significance for the more "existentialist" elements in the "existential analytic," Kierkegaard set in motion the "destruction of the history of ontology" and hence anticipated the central ontological argument of *Being and Time* and the whole gesture of "overcoming metaphysics" in the later Heidegger.

By opposing existential repetition to Platonic recollection and Hegelian mediation, the beginning and end of metaphysics, he mounted a sweeping attack upon the whole history of metaphysics. Platonism makes light of time while Hegelianism offers a fraudulent version of time. Hegelianism is but a variation of Platonism which undermines the contingency of temporal movement, even as Platonism undermines time itself. Together they completely subvert *kinesis* and becoming; they turn them over to the rule of essence and necessity, to pure thought and disengaged speculation. Metaphysics is an exercise in disinterested *nous* looking on at the spectacle of *eidos* or of a phenomenological "we" serenely observing the logical unfolding of the formations (*Gestaltungen*) of the spirit.

For Kierkegaard everything turns on our ability to take our stand in the flux,

to press forward in the element of actuality and becoming rather than to seek some way around it. It is a matter of "interest" in the literal sense of *inter-esse*, ²² of being-between, of firmly placing oneself in and amidst the strife of temporal becoming:

If one does not have the category of recollection or of repetition all life dissolves into an empty, meaningless noise. Recollection is the pagan [*ethniske*] view of life, repetition the modern; repetition is the *interest* [*Interesse*] of metaphysics, and also the interest upon which metaphysics comes to grief; repetition is the watchword [*Losnet*] in every ethical view; repetition is the *conditio sine qua non* [the indispensable condition] for every issue in dogmatics. (SV III 189/R 149)

Repetition displaces the disinterested posture of metaphysical thought and sets in motion the "foundering" of metaphysics, the way it "comes to grief." In this foundering the Heideggerian gestures of *Destruktion* and *Überwindung* are already anticipated. For Kierkegaard, metaphysics, ethics, and theology in short, the length and breadth of "onto-theo-logic" shatter against the rocks of "interest."

"As soon as interest steps forth, metaphysics steps aside," Kierkegaard explains. Repetition forces metaphysics to the side in order to make room for the existing spirit. The existing spirit belongs to the sphere of actuality, for which the categories of logic are a bad fit. Metaphysics wants either to negate movement and make its way out the back door of time or to replace them with seductive logical counterfeits. Repetition cuts off all subterfuge, forcing the spirit to proceed without recourse to the fantastic constructions of *eidos* and *Geist*. Metaphysics puts becoming under the protective rule of essence so that nothing genuinely new can emerge. But religious repetition, which is the subjective passion that presses forward in virtue of faith, says with St. Paul, "Behold all things have become new" (II Cor 5:17).

Even ethics, which takes its stand in actuality and real choice, remains bound to the sphere of immanence and a logic of moral development. Hence even in the ethical sphere, nothing really new happens. Ethics functions within the range of law-governed change. Religious repetition, on the other hand, means a more radical transition from fall to grace, from sin to at-one-ment shattering all ethical continuity.

Either all of existence comes to an end in the demand of ethics, or the condition [faith] is provided and the whole of life and existence begins anew, not through an immanent continuity with the former existence, which is a contradiction, but through a transcendence. (SV IV 289/CA 17n)

Religious repetition, as a discontinuous wrenching free from sin, does not arise immanently, from laws internal to moral development, but transcendentally, from the intervention of God's saving act. Ethics does not make a single step forward

out of the sphere of immanence. Here then is the end the delimitation of metaphysics and ethics, of ethical and metaphysical humanism, of any future metaphysics of morals:

If repetition is not posited, ethics becomes a binding power. No doubt it is for this reason that the author states that repetition is the watchword in every ethical view. (SV IV 290/CA 18n)

Despite his talk of "subjectivity," what Kierkegaard has in mind is the foundering of all human categories, the shattering of the subjective and the anthropocentric. In the face of the fury of the flux, only faith can move forward. Faith intervenes just where everything human and rational, everything ethical and metaphysical, every form of humanism, comes to grief. And not only ethics and metaphysics but also theology ("dogmatics") too. For inasmuch as theology takes itself to be capable of making progress in sorting out the flux by means of its onto-theo-logical categories, it too is a kind of paganism: [23](#)

If repetition is not posited, dogmatics cannot exist at all, for repetition begins in faith, and faith is the organ for issues of dogma. (SV IV 290/CA 18n)

The full range of onto-theo-logic of metaphysics, ethics, and theology is thereby delimited. There can be no mistaking the character of Kierkegaard's project. If it is "religious," as it certainly is, it proceeds by way of a religious delimitation of onto-theo-logic, a religious way out of philosophy and metaphysics, and hence belongs essentially to the project of the deconstruction or overcoming of metaphysics.

Without having this vocabulary at his disposal, Kierkegaard saw quite clearly into the shortcomings of the metaphysics of presence the essential tendency of metaphysics to arrest the flux. He saw in the beginnings of metaphysics, in the doctrine of recollection, a philosophy of timeless presence which tells the story of the loss of presence and how presence lost can be restored. And he saw in its Hegelian completion the subordination of time and becoming to the immobility of logical necessity: In the beginning, an archeology of lost presence; at the end, a teleology of history rushing headlong into a historical *pleroma*, a *parousia*, a consummation of presence. In the one case, a nostalgia for a presence lost; in the other, a dreamy hope and rational optimism about presence promised. Metaphysics is essentially an archeo-teleological project.

Within the history of metaphysics, Kierkegaard saw only one alternative to its inveterate idealism, and that lay in the Aristotelian doctrine of *kinesis*. Against Plato and the Eleatics, Aristotle set his sights on movement and actuality, the real transition from the possible to the actual. But in fact Kierkegaard was pressing Aristotelianism, and philosophy generally, beyond its limits, putting demands upon it which it could not meet. That is why Kierkegaard always had

to look for heroes *outside* metaphysics: Socrates, the great existing individual just before metaphysics who regarded the doctrine of recollection as a temptation to be resisted; Abraham and Job, on the outskirts of faith in the Old Testament; and finally the knight of faith himself, the Christian believer, St. Paul's "just man." The real, the concrete, the existing, the temporal, the free and contingent these were matters for which the categories of metaphysics were in principle unprepared. Metaphysics always wants to keep a safe distance from the flux and to maintain its balance by means of an objectifying thinking. It maintains itself at a distance from the flux and thereby induces the optical illusion of stillness, even as from a distance the square tower looks round. It is always on the lookout for the stable essence, the law that constrains movement, the *eidos* and the *Begriff* which keeps the flux in check.

But as soon as metaphysics becomes interested, as soon as it is drawn into the flux and loses its protective barrier, it is forced to acknowledge the groundless play, the abyss, the absence inhabiting every claim to presence. What concerned Kierkegaard above all was the mysterious movement of faith, the midnight hour of faith, the abyss in which the existing individual, outside the protective shelter of the universal, takes his stand before God. What concerned Kierkegaard was the darkness of faith, not the light of reason, the abyss of freedom, not the reliability of logic. His thought takes place in the twilight zone between presence and absence, the point of intersection, of the interweaving of eternity and time.

Thus the deeply deconstructive element in Kierkegaard, which begins the work of dismantling the apparatus of metaphysics, belongs to a hermeneutic ²⁴ attempt to restore the sphere of "actuality." Kierkegaard displaces the philosophy of Being and presence with *inter-esse*, with being-in-the-midst-of, with existence always already exposed to the flux. This deconstructive work leads us back to the human condition, not in the sense of the humanism which he rejected, but in the sense of a decentering of human willfulness which reveals the poverty of our circumstances. It leads us back to the original difficulty of life which metaphysics always wants to erase. In repetition we press ahead into what Derrida calls the *ébranler*, where the whole trembles (*sollicitare*), a region which is marked for Kierkegaard by "fear and trembling," from which, like the companion piece published on the same day, repetition cannot be separated.