"REPETITION (IN THE KIERKEGAARDIAN SENSE OF THE TERM)"

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1. Kierkegaard's Gjentagelsen

The Text

Kierkegaard published Repetition in 1843; his pseudonym this time was Constantin Constantius. The Danish title is Gjentagelsen, meaning literally "the taking back." It is not easy to decide what sort of text this is: a narration or a philosophical essay or perhaps an ironic mixture of both. Kierkegaard has Constantin make fun of this problematic in a sort of appendix, where he turns to "the real reader of this book," called "Mr. X, Esq." This real and ideal reader is apparently not a critic or an "ordinary reviewer," since such a specimen would have taken the opportunity to "elucidate that it is not a comedy, tragedy, novel, epic, epigram, story and to find it inexcusable that one tries in vain to say 1.2.3. Its ways he will hardly understand since they are inverse; nor will the effort of the book appeal to him, for as a rule reviewers explain existence in such a way that both the universal and the particular are annihilated" [190/226]. This is said in the final pages, retrospectively, like a "repetition" to remind the reader—"Mr. X"—in what way and genre he has not read and, perhaps, to hint at a failed dialectic ("tries in vain to say 1.2.3."). And that the "ways" of the text are "inverse."

"Inverse"?

This odd statement at the end of the text may persuade the reader to "repeat" the very beginning of the text, where Constantin discusses "movement" in relation to the concepts of repetition and recollection and comes up with this definition: "Repetition and recollection are the same movement, only in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward; whereas the real repetition is recollected forward" [115/131]. As a conceptual introduction to this text, where the "ways" at last are called "inverse," we are invited to think "repetition" and "recollection" as the same movement—only in opposite directions. The same but opposite. And "repetition" as a movement "forward."

"Forward"?

The beginning and the end of the text Repetition thus give us two directions, both quite surprising. The beginning I quoted is furthermore prefaced by a little anecdote about directions and movement: Diogenes is

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1. I quote Kierkegaard from Samlede Vaerker 5, in comparison with the English translation by Howard Hong and Edna Hong in Kierkegaard's Writings 6, here 187/223. Page references will be given in the text. I have in many cases modified the English translation to make it more literal.
there said to have “refuted” the Eleatics, who “denied motion” not by saying anything but
by pacing “back and forth a few times” [115/131].

“Back and forth”? If we then regard the Diogenes of the anecdote (“back and forth”) as a heading for
the text Repetition and keep diverging directions in mind (“forward,” “inverse”) it could
perhaps in a preliminary way be said that Repetition is a text on movement—and a
movement back and forth. This movement goes on in the temporality of the text: I will
show later how the text changes its narrative mode between past and present time. And
philosophically the text discusses the past of recollection and the now of “repetition.” The
text paces between temporal modes and between narrative and philosophical discourses.
The conditions for the movement of the text are defined in its framework, in the “back-
and-forth,” “same-but-opposite,” “backward-forward” of the beginning; and the “in-
verse” of the end.

This movable text, Repetition, Kierkegaard wrote ironically under a pseudonym that
suggests permanence. The text was published together with Fear and Trembling—this
under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio—which concludes in a Heraclitean anecdote:
Heraclitus is said to have had a disciple who developed the thought of the master that you
cannot enter the same river twice by saying that one “cannot do it even once. Poor
Heraclitus, to have a disciple like that! By this improvement, the Heraclitean thesis was
amended into an Eleatic thesis that denies motion” [111/123].

Repetition starts in this logical problem of motion and movement; first Constantin
praises “repetition” for a couple of pages: “it is reality and the earnestness of existence”
[116/133]. “Repetition” is called the “new” philosophical idea of the same phenomenon
that the Greeks called “recollection” (anamnesis). Constantin then starts to narrate:
“About a year ago,” he writes and remembers, “I became very much aware of a young
man” (117/133). This young man—the Danish word is actually menneske ‘human be-
ing’—is melancholically in love; Constantins diagnosis is that the young man as a poet
lives in memory and that the beloved girl lacks reality (for him). “The young girl was not
his beloved, she was the occasion that awakened the poetic in him . . . and precisely by
that she had signed her own sentence of death” [121/138]. Constantin suggested a
treatment: the young man should fake his love to another girl—meaning that Constantin
wanted the young man to say one thing and mean another, that is, become ironic. This
is impossible, however, and Constantin has to admit that the young man as a poet only has
one language while the ironist has two: the ironist “discovers an alphabet that has as many
letters as the ordinary one, thus he can express everything in his thieves’ language so that
no sigh is so deep that he does not have the laughter that corresponds to it in thieves’
language” [127/145].

Constantin makes some further philosophical reflections on the concept of “repeti-
tion” [131/149—I discuss this later] then changes to a new narration on the “exploring
expedition I made to test the possibility and meaning of repetition” [132/150]. The
expedition heads for Berlin, where Constantin has once been and where he now wants to
repeat” what already was. Extensively and enthusiastically Berlin is remembered as it
once was, while the “exploring expedition” is dismissed as ridiculous and impossible.
The longest description is given the memory of a Posse, a popular farce, that Constantin
once saw and loved but now finds unbearable—“The only repetition was the impossibility
of repetition” [149/170].

This part of the text, this philosophical journey, seems to me difficult to handle: why
this enthusiasm about (a) memory? Why this drastic refutation of “repetition”? If it is a
refutation—perhaps it is a hint that “repetition” of something, whatever it is, is doomed
to failure, while “repetition” as such—as movement—is necessary.

The text moves into its second part, called Gjentagelsen ‘the taking back’: Rep-
etition. The part—the second part—has the same name as the whole. Or does this mean
that the second part “repeats” the whole as a “repetition” of Repetition? that the second part is the secunda philosophia, which Kierkegaard in another context calls “repetition”?2

The narrative of the second part tells us that the never-fulfilled love story of the first part comes to its conclusion as real separation. The young man turns up again writing letters to Constantin, where we can follow his romantic outbursts up to the point where the beloved girl turns out to have married! Something the young man in his last letter calls a real “repetition”—“repetition” realized as the young man’s separation from his beloved! Gone are the ironies of the first part of the text and we meet instead the privileged form of romantic self-expression: the sentimental letter. Gone, too, is the temporal distance of the first part: Constantin moves into the present tense and his few comments remain in the same vague now as the letters. Narratologically Kierkegaard and Constantin move from diegesis to mimesis, to use the Platonic terminology. In the shape of mimesis the doubling-repetition-reversal that Kierkegaard calls “repetition” is made acute.

The text is kept in this temporally vague now until the young man has produced his last letter. Then Constantin writes his own letter, separated from part two—the “repetition” of Repetition—by a page visualizing an envelope with Mr. X on it—“the real reader of this book.” We meet, in other words, a very literal and drastic separation directly after we have separated from the young man and the young man from his girl. What we meet, again, is irony—and in contrast to the pathos of the young man. Constantin uses this ironic moment to inform his reader of what has happened and of what kind of text he has not read. He repeats his diagnosis from the first part, calling the young man a “poet” and in contrast to himself: “I myself cannot become a poet, and in any case my interest lies elsewhere” [192/228]. He also calls himself a “vanishing person”—and in relation to the young man he has been like “a woman giving birth” [194/230].

Constantin steps parabatically forward to call himself “vanishing” and promising to “serve” the reader by being “another” [192/228]. And by calling the “ways” of his text “inverse” [190/226]. It seems that the only way to come to terms with his “repetition” would be to read the text again, spelling out that other alphabet, the one that Constantin ascribed to the ironist.

The Concept

“Repetition” is, among other things in Kierkegaard’s Repetition, a philosophical concept, formulated by Kierkegaard through Constantin as a reply to the Greek (that is, Platonic) recollection (anamnesis) and the “mediation” (that is, dialectic Aufhebung of newer [that is, Hegelian] philosophy.

Let me now after the paraphrase above try philosophy: there are two passages in the first part where Constantin develops the concept “repetition.” The first is in the opening pages, where Constantin situates the concept in relation to “recollection”: they are, as we remember, “the same movement, only in opposite directions,” “repetition” moving “forward” [115/131]. The second is a transition between the narration on the young man and that on the expedition to Berlin: here Constantin develops his criticism of “what has mistakenly been called mediation” [130/148], that is, Hegelian dialectics. Against this he reminds us of the “Greek development of the teaching of being and nothingness, the development of ‘the instant,’ of ‘non-being,’” etc. [131/148]. This is apparently another Greek theory than the one connecting knowledge and reality with recollection, that is,

2. The expression comes from Begrebet Angest (The Concept of Agony) [SV 6:119]. One will find a discussion of “repetition” there, esp. 116n; also in Philosophiske Smuler (Philosophical Trifles) [SV 6]; Kierkegaard’s Papiret (Papers) from 1844; Constantin’s polemics against Heiberg; and chap. 1 in Johannes Climacus’s De omnibus dubitandum est.
another Plato: concepts like being and nothingness we find in Plato’s dialogue *Parmenides*, which is also Plato’s most rigorous analysis of those “Eleatics” who became famous for “denying motion,” according to the first page of *Repetition*.

Constantin’s discussion makes it apparent that he has found more in Plato’s *Parmenides* than Platonic anamnesis and Eleatic immobility. He has even found a term that sounds more like Kierkegaard than Plato: *øieblikket*, literally meaning “the glance of the eye” and here translated as the “instant.” The term probably derives from a suggestive passage of *Parmenides* that I will take up later. Here the “instant” is associated with “repetition” before Constantin continues his discussion of the relation of the concept to Hegelian “mediation” (dialectics):

> It is in our days not explained how mediation comes about, if it is a result of the movement of the two elements, and in what way it already from the start is contained in these, or if it is something new that is added, and in that case how. In this regard the Greek ideas about the concept kinesis, which corresponds to the modern category ‘transition,’ should be considered seriously. The dialectic of repetition is easy; because what is repeated, has been, otherwise it could not be repeated, but the fact that it has been, makes repetition into the new. When the Greeks said that all knowledge is recollection, then they said that all of existence, which is, has been, when you say that life is a repetition, you say: the existence, that has been, now becomes. When you haven’t got the category of recollection or repetition, all life dissolves into an empty noise devoid of content.  

First Constantin discusses dialectics: is the Aufhebung of synthesis (“mediation”) the result of movement in or between thesis and antithesis (“the two elements”) or is it a new movement? The question may seem narrow, but is interesting since it indicates Constantin’s interest: to make dialectics into a form of movement. The association with “repetition” makes clear that the movement is a movement in time: a temporal figure. The second sentence prepares for this temporality by way of terms like *kinesis* (movement) and “transition”; the latter may be Kierkegaard’s version of metaballon and both these terms are extensively used in *Parmenides*. The sentence seems unclear to me but underlines Constantin’s fascination: movement.

Then the “dialectics of repetition” is established—in contrast, we may assume, to Hegelian dialectics and in conflict with the “Eleatics” (who “denied movement”), but in affiliation with *kinesis*. “Repetition” is here a movement in time: re-take, re-peat, re-turn, re-verse means going back in time to what “has been.” But still, in spite of this movement backward, “repetition” makes it new and is therefore a movement forward: it is “the new.” The reason this movement backward is actually a movement forward is temporal: you cannot re-peat/re-take what has been, since what has been has been. The *now* of “repetition” is always an *after*. But not only: since the movement of “repetition” also makes it new, makes “the new”—simultaneously with being a repeating re-duplication—“repetition” suspends the temporal order of before-after in or by that *now* previously called “the instant.” The temporal dialectics of “repetition” suspends temporal sequence: the *now* that is always an *after* comes actually *before*—it is the *now* of “the instant,” the sudden intervention in sequential time, the caesura that defines what has been and prepares what is to become. If there is one sentence summarizing “Repetition (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term),” then this is that sentence.

Next Constantin contrasts “repetition” to Platonic anamnesis. The philosophy of recollection absolutizes what has been, according to Constantin, and thereby excludes the movement forward, “the new.” Recollected life is posthumous life, whereas “repetition”
transcends recollection and reduplication by its “taking back” and making new. “Repetition” thus installs now as the impetus of existence and becoming as its movement.

The third and fourth sentences work to give a temporal privilege to the now. A few sentences earlier in the text Constantin associated the “instant” and “nonbeing” with “repetition.” He is probably thinking of a sequence in Plato’s Parmenides [156DE] that discusses the relations among movement (kinesis), standstill (stasis), and change or transition (metaballon). Plato has Parmenides ask himself and us what strange position time is taking when change-movement-transition occurs. He answers: “the instant” (to eksaifnes; the Latin translation is momentum). Further discussion underscores that this concept is a nonconcept, since it refers to a phenomenon that only exists in the state of what Constantin would call “nonbeing.” Plato has Parmenides put it like this: “this strange instantaneous nature, this something that is patched between movement and standstill and that does not exist in any time; but into this instant and out of this instant, that which is in movement changes into standstill and that which is at a standstill changes into movement.”

“Repetition” as a temporal figure gives priority to that instantaneous now that is calculated according to the paradoxical “instant” of Plato’s Parmenides.

The final sentence of my quotation takes a step backward in the dialectic by suggesting that the contrast between “repetition” and “recollection” was not absolute after all. Both are here concepts of order bringing some kind of conceptual organization to an existence that without this order would be a “noise” without meaning. It is worth noting that when he imagines the world of nonmeaning, Constantin leaves his prominent temporal or spatial vocabulary to evoke an auditive horror: pure noise.

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The conceptual exegesis I have tried above should have given some hints why “repetition” is such a haunting concept for problematic and problematizing modern thinkers like Nietzsche, Freud, and Derrida. I will try to show, in the second half of this essay, why and how “repetition” was obsessive for Paul de Man. Here I can only mention that Heidegger’s Wiederholung as it is developed in Sein und Zeit [especially 65–74] may well be the link between Kierkegaard and deconstructive thinking—except that Heidegger’s association of Wiederholung with a dramatic term like Entschlossenheit (“opening decisiveness”) tends to underscore the “existential” dimensions of the concept: its pathos. The reason why Kierkegaard may have modern relevance—even when he insists that “repetition” is a “transcendental” category giving privilege to the presence of the now; and even to thinkers who elsewhere seem immune to the transcendental and critical of all ideas of “presence”—must be that his “repetition” is an “existential” as well as a textual category. This is possible since he insists on “repetition” as a temporal term—tempus having grammatical, syntactical, and narratological meaning besides being the very mode for being and becoming, thus combining pathos and irony.

Kierkegaard’s “repetition” is furthermore a paradoxical term: it tempts with the presence of a privileged now while excluding this presence. The dialectic of Kierkegaardian “repetition” is—according to Constantin—“easy”: “what is repeated, has been, otherwise it could not be repeated, but the fact that it has been, makes repetition into the new.” This means that the privileged now has always already been, and what has been could always become. This paradoxical movement catches something of the dialectics of time as instant and time as process; and time is, after all, both sequential and “existential” in the sense of instantaneous. The paradox of Kierkegaardian “repetition” is that it tries to keep these divergent dimensions together in one movement—making “repetition” into a nonconcept or a concept negating the presence it suggests; or a nonconcept related to Plato’s to eksaifnes in Parmenides: “this strange instantaneous nature, this something
patched between movement and standstill and that does not exist in any time”; or Derrida’s contemporary nonconcepts like difféance or itération.

The Story

The philosophical parts of Repetition are narratively framed, and the question is now how concept and narrative combine: do they support each other or are there tensions? The text is rich in possibilities, but I will discuss just two: its pathos, concentrated in the young man’s sublime wishes, and its irony, exemplified by Constantin’s textual “reversal.”

a. Sublime Silence?

Repetition tells us among other things of the nameless young man unhappily in love with a nameless young girl. The second part gives the young man the floor through the letters he sends to Constantin reporting on his feelings up to the point he learns that the girl has married. After having compared his miserable love story with the ordeal of Job of the Old Testament, the young man seems prepared to interpret the unhappy outcome happily, as a real “repetition.” “Is there not, then, a repetition? Did I not get everything double? Did I not get myself back and precisely in such a way that I might have a double sense of its meaning?” [185 f./220 f.].

The question form hints that the young man is not quite confident that he has got the thing right. His lack of confidence returns in several commentaries, where problems of interpretation are solved by the idea that Kierkegaard may have transformed an original version, where the young man was to commit suicide.3 Our young man welcomes his liberation. My “yawl is afloat,” he exclaims [186/221], looking forward to sailing on the sea where “ideas spume with elemental fury, where thoughts arise noisily . . . where at other times there is a stillness like the deep silence of the South Sea,” etc. He compares his new position to a “beaker of inebriation” and praises the “cresting waves, that hide me in the abyss” and “fling me up above the stars.” It is not self-evident that the young man should be inspired by learning that his beloved has married, nor is the “repetition” apparent. The young man’s metaphors, moreover, seem disturbing: the prospects for a “yawl” on a spumy sea seem not very promising. And if the young man is the “yawl,” who, then, is the helmsman?

The young man’s perhaps disturbing enthusiasm is expressed in terms that only a little earlier in aesthetic history were standard when describing the sublime: “spume with elemental fury,” “waves that hide me in the abyss . . . that fling me up above the stars.” We recognize the vocabulary from one of this young man’s closest predecessors, that nameless, unfortunate, and sublime lover in Rousseau’s Julie (1760), known by the pseudonym “Saint-Preux.” When he learns that his beloved Julie actually has married, he doesn’t exactly welcome this, but he bids farewell to everything for the sea. And in his final letter [3:26], which also is the last of the third part of the novel and its very turning point, he listens to the signal of the departing boat and welcomes the “vast sea, the immense sea, that perhaps will engulf me.”4

3. It should perhaps be noted that the traditional Danish interpretation of Repetition is heavily biographical and connects the story with Kierkegaard’s broken engagement. The only serious treatment of the text as narrative text is found in Aage Henriksen, Kierkegaards romaner [Copenhagen, 1954].

4. Œuvres completes 2:397: “Il faut monter à bord, il faut partir. Mer vaste, mer immense, qui dois peut-être m’engloutir dans ton sein; puisse-je retrouver sur tes flots le calme qui fut mon coeur agité!”
Immanuel Kant, too, who was an avid reader of Rousseau but certainly not excessive in his vocabulary, comes up with sea and stars when discussing the sublime, das Erhabene, in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* [1790, #29]. The sea in itself is not sublime, but it can be experienced as sublime, according to Kant, if we manage to purge the experience of purpose and meaning. To experience the sea as sublime, writes Kant, we must not see it as we represent it in thought, not as, for example, an element uniting people and separating continents, because “such are only teleological judgments.” To find the sea sublime, “we must regard it as the poets do, according to what the impression upon the eye reveals, as, let us say, when it is calm, a clear mirror of water bounded only by the heavens, or when it is agitated, like an abyss threatening to engulf all.”

Even the “thunderstorm,” which Kierkegaard’s young man in his last letters is looking forward to as an upsetting preparation for the instant of “repetition,” has its counterpart in Kant: in #27 he writes that the experience of the sublime is mobile (bewegt) in contrast to the beautiful, which is experienced calmly, in ruhiger Kontemplation. The mobility is more precisely called an agitation (Erschütterung), that is, a “rapidly changing repression and attraction of the very same object.” (Constantin would have reminded us of the usefulness of that Greek thinking of kinesis when it comes to the paradoxes of “repetition.”)

When the young man in his last letter exclaims that his “yawl is afloat,” he is apparently heading for a voyage without purpose or meaning—but expecting the sublime, or, to say it with Kant, both abyss and heaven. What is remarkable is that the young man describes his expected experiences in auditive terms: ideas are about to “spume,” thoughts to “arise noisily”; and he also expects a “stillness like the deep silence of the South Sea” [186/221]. Noise as well as silence indicate that the young man’s expectations of the sublime point to the nonverbal or to pure sound (that is, language without purpose or meaning). Or to deep silence. The desire of this text for a privileged now can be realized only beyond a language of meaning.

This desire or expectation is realized, although with heavy irony, that is, in a mode far from the young man’s language. What follows after the young man has expressed his spuming desires to leave language is neither silence nor void—but text as object, that is, beyond purpose or meaning. What follows on the page after the young man’s last word is the picture of an envelope addressed to the anonymous Mr. X and “containing” Constantin’s letter to “the real reader of this book.”

But the text carries another expectation that is not realized in any way, not even ironically, when the young man heads for his sublime noise. I am thinking of the conceptual analysis quoted above, where Constantin stated that both “repetition” and recollection are concepts of order and without these “all life” would dissolve in “an empty noise devoid of content” [131/149]. It was apparent in this passage that recollection and “repetition” were not opposites in this respect but that both (in different directions?) organized the “noise” of phenomenal world/life into meaning—we may guess from circumstances that “repetition” would offer a paradoxical meaning but still a contrast to

5. Kritik der Urteilskraft 175 f.: “denn das gibt lauter teleologische Urteile; sondern man muss den Ozean bloss, wie die Dichter es tun, nach dem, was der Augenschein zeigt, etwa, wenn er in Ruhe betrachtet wird, als einen klaren Wasserspiegel, der bloss vom Himmel begrenzt ist, aber ist er unruhig, wie einen alles zu verschlingenden drohenden Abgrund, dennoch erhaben finden können.” The passage is thoroughly commented on by Paul de Man in “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant.”


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pure noise. The young man, however, expects a new life after his “repetition” in terms that come suspiciously close to that “empty noise” feared by Constantin.

Something has gone wrong here in the relation between concept and narration—or between Constantin and the young man. Perhaps Constantin should have told us that the young man had seriously misunderstood the concept of “repetition” and that by leaping into the nonlinguistic nonorder he approaches something like Kierkegaardian “despair”? Nothing, however, prevents us from seeing the young man’s sublime expectations as a (narrative) correction of Constantin’s conceptual analysis—nothing, at least, until Constantin’s following and final letter. The correction would situate “repetition” in the “abyss” or among the “stars” or in “noise” or “silence”—in any case beyond language as a hint that the privileged now of the “instant” can be found only outside time and meaning.

b. Ordo inversus

Constantin informs us repeatedly that the young man is a poet. “I myself cannot become a poet” [192/228], he says, and calls himself a “prose writer” [184/218]—the word prosaist can also be understood as “prosaic writer.” Developed full-scale in Hegel’s aesthetics, in Kierkegaard’s day this well-known opposition of prose vs. poetry coincided with something like romanticism vs. prosaic reality, and the romantic-poetic pole of the opposition was associated with subjectivity, imagination, and an orphic vision.

Other ingredients of the text make Constantin and the young man into opposites: the name and the eye. While Constantin is a telling pseudonym, the young man is nameless. And in contrast to Constantin he has trouble with his eyes: he escapes from his beloved in order not to have to look at her; “Think of me spotting her,” he writes to Constantin, “I believe I would have gone mad” [166/192]. Constantin, on the other hand, does not hesitate to use his eyes in contact with girls: “my eyes sought her,” “my eyes were upon her” [146 f./167], he tells us when reporting on a meeting in Berlin. And that glance of the eye—gieblikket—of course has decisive importance for Constantin’s development of the philosophy of “repetition.”

It is different with the young man, our orphic poet: he escapes seeing his nameless Eurydice, and his final fantasy of a sublime presence is beyond the eye and its glance in the sense that his fantasy is auditive.

The eye and the glance were problems also for the mythical Orpheus, who may well be one allegorical pattern behind or before Constantin’s young poet and his sad love story; another one could be Psyche, who is blinded by meeting Eros, or could face the God only in darkness. The myth of Orpheus has to do with the glance, with retrieval, and with that manifest reversal of Eurydice’s turning around—and, of course, of inspiration, song, poetry. The ambiguity of the myth has been wonderfully analyzed by Maurice Blanchot, when he points out, for example, that the orphic “turning” to Eurydice means destruction and Eurydice’s return to the shadows; but not turning would not be a lesser “betrayal”: against that “movement” of Orpheus that means that he wants to have Eurydice not in her “daily truth” but in her “nocturnal obscurity,” in her “distance,” that he wants to see her “not when she is visible but when she is invisible.”

Like this Orpheus, our young man
wants to see his girl but still not see her, and to worship her at a distance. Already at the
beginning of the text, Constantin points out that the young man’s love is poetical: the girl
“awakened the poetic in him and made him a poet” [121/138], allegorically speaking
Orpheus creates his Eurydice in order to become the power of singing. Constantin adds
that “precisely thereby [she] had signed her own death sentence”: the orphic-poetic love
demands the absence of the woman or needs the woman as shadow, as death.

On only one occasion does the girl stop being the shadow of the text: by her suddenly
being married. This—her first and last sign of life—makes her finally dead to the young
man. The allegorical reading according to Orpheus would indicate this as a result of the
young man’s turning around, his reversal. But this does not work: as far as I can see this
reversal-leading-to-“repetition” is the result of her turning her back on him and walking
into the Hades of marriage. Here an allegorical reading according to Psyche and Eros may
be closer: in the decisive moment the eye turns away or is blinded; the glance of the eye
makes it all dark.

No allegorical expectations, however, neither according to Orpheus’s story nor to
Psyche’s, fit the young man’s final fantasies after the girl has turned around and
disappeared. His auditive enthusiasm is instead an almost polemical contrast to the visual
fantasies on the conditions of love and language that found mythical expressions in the
tales of Orpheus and of Psyche and Eros.

It is at this decisive point in the text—when voice threatens glance and when sound
threatens meaning—that Constantin makes his visual coup: that parabasical picture of a
letter, framing his final message to the “real reader” Mr. X. It is an ironic intervention,
an ironic punctuation of the pathetic letters of the young man. And the irony is
underscored by Constantin, in his letter, when he addresses the type of writer who knows
how to write “in such a way that the heretics could not understand it” [194/225]—that is,
the writer who writes with double meaning or, as Constantin put it in the first part of the
text, who “can express all in his thieves’ language so that no sigh is so deep that he does
not have the laughter that corresponds to it in thieves’ language” [127/145].

Constantin’s ironic position puts an end to the allegory according to Orpheus or
according to Psyche and Eros but also to the young man’s auditive fantasies. There is
nevertheless a connection between his irony and the allegory, and this connection is the
same as the concept, the story, and the text: “repetition.”

In his well-known analysis of allegory Paul de Man writes that the “meaning
constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the repetition (in the
Kierkegaardian sense of the term) of a previous sign with which it can never coincide,
since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority” (“The Rhetoric of
Temporality” 207). This formal definition of allegory de Man connects with irony and
argues that allegory and irony are “linked in their common discovery of a truly temporal
predicament” [222]. This “predicament” I take to be the discovery of an instantaneous
now, or rather that the present now, to become the presence of an instantaneous now, must
have a precedence.

The Kierkegaardian “repetition” that de Man has in mind can only be the “repetition”
in those senses I have analyzed above, the “taking back” that tells us that “the existence,
that has been, now becomes” [131/149]. This is a “temporal predicament,” to use de
Man’s judgment, because the now that is privileged by “repetition” is also an after,
meaning that the presence of the now presupposes an absence—something like the ab-
sence of the girl that is needed to serve the young man’s orphic passion. Or something

Mais ne pas se tourner vers Eurydice, ce ne serait pas moins trahir, être infidèle à la force sans
mesure et sans prudence de son mouvement, qui ne veut pas Eurydice dans sa vérité diurne et dans
son agrément quotidien, qui la veut dans son obscurité nocturne, dans son éloignement, avec son
corps fermé et son visage scellé, qui veut la voir, non quand elle est visible, mais quand elle est
invisible. . . ."
like that famous nonmeeting of Psyche and Eros: an allegorical sign for presence, which can take place only in the absence of blinded darkness.

How can such a temporal dialectic be recounted?

Kierkegaard’s answer was the “indirect message.” Kierkegaard communicated indirectly through pseudonyms and by letting a pseudonym like Constantin communicate ironically, in “thieves’ language.” Indirectly Constantin tells the reader how to read the text Repetition, by telling him, in his concluding letter, how not to read it: not as a “comedy, tragedy, novel.” And not straight, since its “ways” are “inverse” [190/226].

“Inverse”?

The word hardly exists in Danish but seems to be derived from the Latin inversio, which in classical rhetorics was a term with both syntactical and semantical sense. Syntactically the term meant a reversed order of the sentence or sentences; semantically the term meant “to say in another way,” that is, it translated the Greek term allegory. Both these senses of an ordo inversus, a reversed order, combine in Repetition: the young man’s allegory is semantical by repeating a myth. Constantin’s ironic intervention with his final letter is syntactical: a reversal in the text. Constantin thereby gives us a sign confirmed by the letter: that the “ways” of the text Repetition are “inverse,” making the text into an ironic allegory of motion: moving, like Diogenes, back and forth between eye and ear, between irony and pathos, between past and present time, between concept and story.

Whether all this mobility functions to organize or disorganize the text—and whether irony and allegory are united or separated in the concept of “repetition”—may have to do with our reading of the relation between the young man and Constantin, that is, between pathos and irony, between “repetition” as an “existential” and as a textual possibility. The irony of Constantin has the first and last word of the text, but the pathos of the young man creates its tensions. The inversio of the young man seeks life but threatens to leave the text. Constantin’s inversio is a back-and-forth in the wake of Diogenes, who according to anecdote took a walk to refute those “Eleatics” who “denied motion” [115/131]. But Constantin differs from Diogenes in using words. Language is his field. The indirect message seems to be that his mobile text keeps language alive—and keeps life within linguistic order.

* * *

Ordo inversus, the reversed-repeated order, means putting things on their heads: putting them right. The philosophy of the subject inaugurated by Kant and radicalized by Kierkegaard makes subjectivity into truth. That is an inversio working ironically in the text Repetition. But this irony hardly lacks pathos and has even got some sublime touches. A late follower of these pre- and postromantics, Paul Celan, had a sense for this sublime reversal: he once pointed out, “whoever walks on his head, ladies and gentlemen— whoever walks on his head, he has the heavens as an abyss underneath him.”

2. Paul de Man on the Point of Repetition

Paul de Man’s interest in “repetition” and “movement” seems to be of an early date. In one of his critical readings of Heidegger from the fifties he finds that Heidegger betrays nothing less than “the movement of being” [“The Temptation of Permanence” 38]. In another from the same period he concludes that Hölderlin, contrary to Heidegger’s


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assertions, shows no “singular ontological reversal, but a lived philosophy of repeated reversal, that is nothing more than the notion of becoming.” The odd expression “repeated reversal” reads *retournement répétè* in the French original, which seems to be de Man’s formulation of the “movement of being” as repetition. Already here his notion of repetition seems closer to Kierkegaard’s than to Heidegger’s *Wiederholung*, that is, fairly free from that *Entschlossenheit* (“opening decisiveness”) that Heidegger uses in *Sein und Zeit* to connect “repetition” with “fate”; instead de Man seems to be open to “repetition” as a textual phenomenon as well as an “existential” or at least intentional possibility. Taking Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* as an allegory, we could say that Constantin and the young man are struggling for the initiative within de Man’s text.

Repetition as a textual phenomenon is developed into the concept of irony in the already-mentioned essay “The Rhetoric of Temporality” from 1969, which must be the starting point of an investigation of “repetition” in the de Manian sense of the term. Not only has this been called his “most fully achieved essay” [Waters lvi], but it has also been judged as the very turning point leading from an earlier, existential-phenomenological de Man to a later, deconstructive de Man, exploring rhetorical analysis. “The Rhetoric of Temporality” is also the only text (so far published) in which de Man refers to Kierkegaard; and if one were to choose a turning point in the essay, itself a turning point in de Man’s writings, I would suggest the parenthesis in which de Man claims “repetition (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term)” to be the “meaning” of the allegorical sign [207]. In any case this parenthesis marks a decisive turn in the essay: from literary history to epistemology and from allegory to irony.

“The Rhetoric of Temporality” is organized in two parts, the first a historical study of the “symbol,” where allegory is introduced as a polemical counterpart to “symbol,” the second a more epistemological study of “irony.” In a conclusion the concepts are linked together in “their common discovery of a truly temporal predicament” [222]. Textual allegory, in contrast to “symbol,” is said to produce a “negative” insight in an “authentically temporal predicament” [208]—and we observe that not only “truly” and “authentically” but also “predicament” seem to be favorite terms.

Allegorical insight is called “negative” because the allegorical sign does not refer to “meaning” but to another sign, characterized by “anteriority.” Allegory therefore accentuates “distance” in contrast to the “symbol,” to which de Man ascribes the effort to reach the full presence of meaning (or of meaning as presence). But allegory not only reminds us of “distance” but reaches its “negative” insight by establishing its language “in the void of this temporal difference” [207]. And there de Man’s formal definition of allegory suddenly acquires a mystical touch: how can language—and not only allegorical language because allegorical language is here apparently an allegory of language in general—be “established” in a “void”? The expression carries a metaphorical suggestion of the very type that de Man is criticizing as mystifyingly “symbolic.” But it does not take much reading to discover that de Man in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” uses an abundance of spatial and/or visual metaphors to suggest the temporality of language, and most striking are the metaphors of mirrors and mirroring.

The mirror becomes explicit at the end of the essay where irony is linked to allegory in that common “temporal predicament.” Irony is there called “the reversed mirror-image” of allegory [225]. This expression also strikes me as mystical—are not mirror-images always “reversed”? what, then, would the reversal of an already reversed mirror-image look like?—but the phrase gives a visual suggestion of the “temporal predicament”

10. “Heidegger’s Exegeses of Hölderlin,” Blindness and Insight 250. The original, in Critique 100 (Sept. 1955), has: “Il n’y a donc pas, dans Hölderlin, un retournement ontologique unique, mais une philosophie vécue du retournement répétè, qui n’est autre que la notion du devenir.”
that includes a “reversal.” (Remember young de Man’s interest in the retournement répété ‘repeated reversal’.) The following sentences “temporalize” the mirroring metaphor, so to speak, by a host of terms indicating suddenness: the ironic intervention in allegorical narration is called “instantaneous,” it takes place “rapidly,” “suddenly,” “in one single moment.” As an example we are given Baudelaire’s prose poems, which are said to “climax in the single brief moment of a final pointe” [225 f.].

Pointe could of course mean the “point” of meaning as well as a temporal “instant,” the graphical dot or grammatical full stop. Everything de Man writes on irony in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” emphasizes its sudden break in temporality: time as instant breaking into time as sequence. With a word like pointe (and all those other words for suddenness), he indicates a kind of “time” that is so limited that it is no longer “time” but instead is a break in time, like a visual dot in the time line. We recognize by now the phenomenon from Plato’s to eksaifnes in Parmenides and from Kierkegaard’s diebliik and Heidegger’s Augenblick.

“Repetition (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term)” is what de Man suggests as a solution to the problem of time, “repetition” as the link uniting time as sequence (“allegory”) and time as instant existence (“irony”). De Man emphasizes, however, the Kierkegaardian interest in the eye that I noted above with allusions to the allegorical-mythical complex Orpheus-Eros-Psyche (and the last is much alluded to in de Man’s essay as well). De Man expresses this visual interest by way of this “reversed mirror-image.” And the meaning of the mirror is established with the help of Baudelaire’s De l’essence du rire (and Baudelaire’s rire is unqualifiedly identified with “irony”). De Man picks up Baudelaire’s example with the man laughing at himself when falling in the street. This has to do with a doubling, dédoublement, of the individual into a falling man and an observing man. In the state that Baudelaire calls le comique absolu this doubling becomes permanent; according to de Man it is a split of the subject provoking uncanny giddiness: “Irony is unrelieved vertige, dizziness to the point of madness” [215].

Doubling, split, and vertigo are all spatial phenomena that are invested with temporal irony by de Man. The intersection of space with time takes place at that “point” that is a turning point as well as a “point of madness.” When de Man a bit further on comes to Baudelaire’s “instantaneous,” “rapid,” and “sudden” pointe, madness seems again not far beside the point, so to speak. That pointe is namely “the instant at which the two selves . . . are simultaneously present, juxtaposed within the same moment”; this moment is called “the mode of the present” [226]. And this sounds both like a definition of schizophrenia and like an evocation of that Platonic ousia, usually translated (by Heidegger, for example) as the presence of the present.

We may note here that this sharp, thin, and dividing point—pointe—that de Man uses to describe repetition, or repetitive reversal from time into space, is indeed thin but still has a kind of extension: it allows for repetition in the form of reflexion, doubling, mirroring. And it invites the “mode of the present.”

The only comment I have found on de Man’s visual metaphors associated with mirroring repetition is, of course, Jacques Derrida’s in Psyché, where he quotes de Man’s assertion on the “truly temporal predicament” discovered by irony and allegory. “The mirror is here the predicament,” writes Derrida, the mirror as a “deadly and fascinating trap.”

What is this—the mirror as trap? Perhaps it is the simple but uncanny effect of mirroring mirrors, something that Walter Benjamin once described beautifully: “When two mirrors look into each other, Satan plays his most popular prank and opens in his own


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way (as his partner does in the eyes of lovers) the perspective into eternity.”12 Derrida, for his part, alludes to the no-less-uncanny myth of Eros and Psyche, already mentioned here as a background reading not only for Kierkegaard but also for de Man. According to Derrida the blinking meeting of Eros-Psyché creates grief, deuil, due to the impossibility of transparency and presence. The word, or at least “a trace of language,” makes presence impossible and mirroring or reflexion necessary.13

De Man started his essay by defining allegory by way of “repetition (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term)” and ended with irony as a “reversed mirror-image.” The question is whether these suggestive terms are new versions of what the young de Man called the moment of being as retournement répété—or whether he has taken an ironic and textual turn. And whether this ironic turn is that of “Satan” or “his partner”—that is, whether it is caught in a mirror trap or opens new movements of both text and being.

This is probably like asking the confusing question whether de Man’s later writing on irony is itself ironic. And the real answer to this question, and those above, is probably to be found in the curiously repetitive structure of the typical late-de Man essay: I am thinking of its convoluted or even circular structure, with the end reflecting, repeating, or doubling the beginning. In the best(?) cases this can produce the “dizziness” he found in Baudelaire’s *comique absolu* and the “reversed mirror-image” of irony (in “The Rhetoric of Temporality”). One well-known example is the programmatic article “Semiology and Rhetoric,” which begins the collection *Allegories of Reading* (1979).

Here we first get a seductively easygoing polemic against the opposition inside/outside, regarded as a metaphor and applied to literature and criticism. Result: “The recurrent debate opposing intrinsic to extrinsic criticism stands under the aegis of an inside/outside metaphor that is never being seriously questioned” [“Semiology and Rhetoric” 5]. De Man then starts his “questioning” with examples of growing complexity, where he turns grammatical meaning against rhetorical meaning. Grammatical meaning appears to suspend rhetorical meaning; and rhetorical meaning suspends grammatical meaning. Final result: a state of “suspended ignorance” [19]. This means that we are now “suspended” within the metaphor with which we started, not knowing what is “in” and what is “out”; we are neither “in” nor “out” but rather falling between. And perhaps, while “falling,” we remember that the “fall” in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” was associated with vertige and irony and thereafter develops into de Man’s most obsessive metaphor.14 Or is that “fall” taking place within a “reversed mirror-image” (or was it a “repeated reversal”?) of that very “reversal” with which we began?

At the end of the whole collection *Allegories of Reading*, a similar “reversal” is again “repeated” but now explicitly as irony. De Man then finishes his readings of Rousseau by summarizing his “main point,” also called a “sudden revelation”: what is revealed is a “discontinuity,” and this sudden and discontinuous “main point” is “disseminated” all over “the points of the figurative line or allegory,” thus becoming a continuous discontinuity—a permanent suddenness, or “the permanent parabasis of an allegory.” Becoming: irony. This irony repeats the “suspended ignorance” from the first essay, but suspends not only an innocent or limited or temporary “ignorance” but actually the whole “line”: irony is now nothing less than “the systematic undoing . . . of understanding” ["Excuses

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13. Psyché 31: “Car nous l’avons vu, si le deuil n’est pas annoncé par lebris du miroir mais survient comme le miroir lui-même que par l’intercession du mot. C’est une invention et une intervention du mot . . . . Le tain, qui interdit la transparence et autorise l’invention du miroir, c’est une trace de langue.”

14. Some instances of “fall” are noted by Deborah Esch in “A Defence of Rhetoric / The Triumph of Reading,” Reading de Man Reading 73.
Irony, which started out as a sudden event, has now become permanent—and this striking paradox could well mean that de Man has entered a trap: ironic "repetition" has been reversed into its own "reversed mirror-image." Already in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" de Man insisted—in contrast to most explorers of the concept of "irony"—that the ironic break was "repetitive." At the end of Allegories of Reading irony has become a "permanent" effect "disseminated" all over the very "line" it was supposed to break. In "The Rhetoric of Temporality" irony was still a "point" breaking lines; in Allegories of Reading this "point" has grown into the "main point" spreading over the "line" of all other "points."

In another late essay, "Pascal’s Allegory of Persuasion," we learn that Pascal uses zero as a break or "rupture" of the line of numbers quite analogous to the "parabasis" of irony that de Man uses as the rhetorical figure to break an allegorical "line." The Pascal essay goes even further: de Man states that the "rupture" of the line of numbers effected by zero (read: the ironic break of an allegorical "line") cannot "be located in a single point . . . but that it is all-pervading" [12]. In "The Rhetoric of Temporality" the ironic effect depended on the final pointe that, in Allegories of Reading, had grown into the "main point." In the Pascal essay the point seems to be gone (or cannot be found) while the ironic effect remains. The conclusion on ironic "disruption" as "all-pervading" may be an effect of what Benjamin called "Satan’s most popular prank": the mirroring mirrors. And it takes de Man to remarkable consequences, considering his earlier essays: in the Pascal essay he states that irony is no longer "susceptible . . . to definition," it is not even "intelligible," and "it cannot be put to work as a device of textual analysis" [12].

It follows that irony disappears as a concept or "device" from de Man’s last essays. "Repetition" in the sense of mirroring and reflexion does not disappear, however. In "Autobiography as De-Facement" we read about a "specular moment," but this "moment" is no "event"—that is, no "point" and therefore no ironic interruption—but rather a "part of all understanding" including "knowledge of self" [70 f.]. This epistemological idea of reflexion with its vaguely Freudian touch could no doubt have been developed into quite another "repetition" than that ironic "point" we met earlier, but still being a kind of "repetition" that could be associated with Kierkegaard. But late de Man has a suggestion of quite another "repetition" that seems far away from any "existential" sense of this prolific term. Now it is "repetition" as mechanical reduplication without the slightest hint of any "reversal" or ironic "point."

The term now is stutter, coming up a few times in de Man’s late essays on "aesthetic ideology" and associated with something he calls "the essentially prosaic nature of art" ["Hegel on the Sublime" 152]. This "nature" he derives (as always) from a linguistic axiom: that the linguistic sign refers to both itself as sign and beyond itself as reference or meaning. Philosophical aesthetics, as de Man reads it in Kant and Hegel, operates on the level of meaning but presupposes a level where the sign is "inscribed" as sign—this he calls the "prosaic materiality of the letter"—as the basis or "bottom line" that aesthetics can neither do without nor make into meaning ["Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant" 144]. De Man may well be inspired by Derrida here, since Derrida uses terms like répétition, itération, différance in his deconstructions of "Western metaphysics" and always with the argument already developed in his criticism of Husserl: that the linguistic sign has an "originally repetitive structure."15 De Man now states that the sign in its material aspect as "inscription" is already a "repetition" that cannot be used to perform anything but "repetition": "Like a stutter, or a broken record, it [the sign] makes what it keeps repeating worthless and meaningless" ["Hegel on the Sublime" 150].

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If this is the end of the line for de Man, the name of that end is apparently “repetition.” But is it ironic repetition? allegorical repetition? Is there anything left of repetition (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term)?

Not according to program (but with the reservation that the stutter is by no means developed into a program): the stuttering repetition seems more like a mechanical interruption emerging from linguistic “materiality” but still purely auditive. Stuttering has no “point”—and perhaps de Man associates it with “prosaic materiality” since it seems free from visuality. Stuttering is in any case devoid of anything like “intention” and definitely has no “existential” pathos.

Still, visuality—and perhaps a kind of irony and even allegory—sneaks back into “repetition” by way of the metaphor that de Man uses to illustrate his meaningless “stutter”: the broken record. The record being broken by its own signs is a kind of visual intervention in the auditive scenery. But it is not only visual: it shows traces of language (as Derrida no doubt would put it). “Record” could be a gramophone record but also a document or even a story, that is, any sequence or line of events. If there is an auditive “break” in this “record” it is visually repaired by the expression “broken record.” This metaphor gives visuality to the “break” and even a kind of meaning to the “meaningless” that the sentence refers to. By the symbolic power of the metaphor—and against what seem to be de Man’s prosaic intentions with his “stutter”—the “break” in the record leads us back to that sudden “break” or “point” that de Man earlier associated with “repetition” and called irony.

Thus, irony ironically comes back to de Man’s record at the very moment when he has dropped all irony. A reversal takes place when reversals are left out of consideration. Perhaps language is taking a kind of revenge—that poor language that de Man (as quoted above) found established in a “void” and then never tired of criticizing for covering up this basic baselessness with the feigned meaning of symbols and metaphors. Language takes its revenge by providing de Man with a meaningful metaphor with symbolic dimensions exactly when he declares language to be a “stutter,” a “meaningless” repetition of sounds. Or was it perhaps the “movement of being” that reminded us of its retournement répété, to say it with the young de Man—reminded us of kinesis, the Greek term that Constantin Constantius asked us to “consider seriously” as a preparation for that “easy” dialectic of repetition?

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